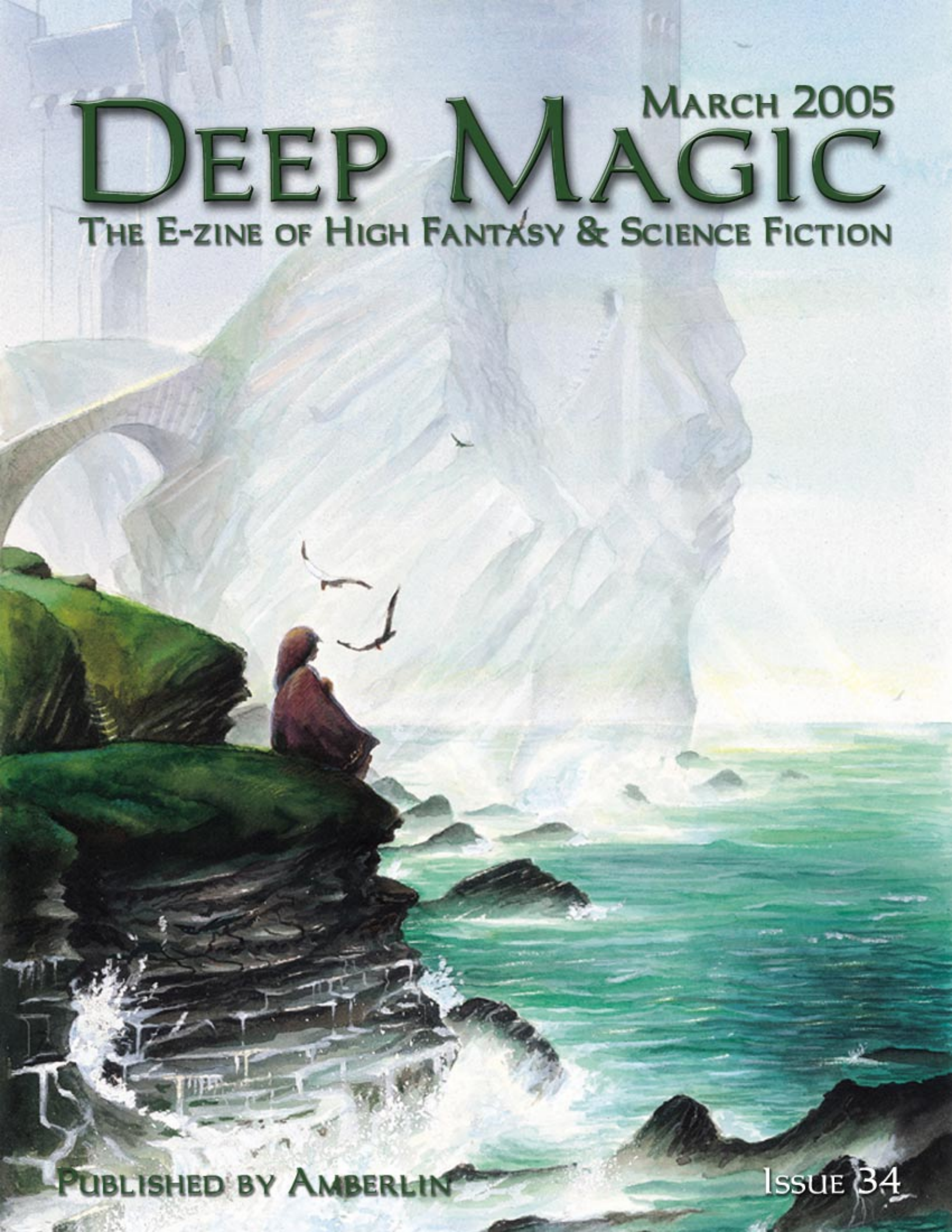
March 2005
Deep Magic
The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction
Published by Amberlin
Issue 34

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March 2005

March is here, Spring is just around the corner, and Deep Magic is quickly approaching the three-year mark. We are starting to wake up from our winter slumber and plan some great things for Deep Magic. We told you a couple months ago to plan for a fund drive this month. Well, those plans have been put on hold while we make bigger plans. No timetable on it yet, but keep an eye out for the next couple months.

We want to thank you all for your response to our call for staff members. We are still making decisions on some, but we have settled on a couple new staff members. Nikki Goethals has joined us as our Art Coordinator. Her background in Graphic Design and keen eye for quality artwork made it an easy choice for us. After having published several reviews with us (not no mention several stories), Sean T. M. Stiennon has come on board as a book reviewer. We thank all those who expressed interest in joining our staff.

This month's issue features a number of stories, articles, etc. that are sure to entertain and enlighten. We are proud to highlight an article by Margaret Weis, written just for Deep Magic readers. As you know, Margaret Weis frequently writes with co-author Tracy Hickman. In this article, she discusses the challenges and rewards of writing with a partner.

Also in the March issue, Jeff Wheeler writes about why he loves Deep Magic (an article with no bias whatsoever!). Our featured artist is Armel Gaulme, and we know you will be impressed. Be sure to read his interview.

For stories, we offer three: Staff member Steven Richards delivers the fast-paced, quick-witted *Collection*; Nigel Atkinson gives us a new twist on time travel in *Knitting with Water*; and Michael P. Dunn takes us into the mind of a mind reader in *With Eyes Open*....

Thank you for reading Deep Magic and helping to make this a successful e-zine. If you have any questions or concerns, or if you just want to leave some praise for an author, you are always welcome to stop by the forums and leave a quick note.

Regards,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. **We have a new due date for Writing Challenge submissions!** They will be printed one month later, and you have longer to submit them. Please note the deadline date below.

March 2005 Writing Challenge
Entries due April 10, 2005

Have you ever struggled over how much back story to squeeze into the first chapters of a novel or the opening paragraphs of a short story? Maybe you decided to just start the story earlier to tell the events "live" so to speak. Perhaps you decided to write a lengthy prologue that reads more like a history text than a fictional tale. Some of your might have parsed bits of back story into your live action, whether the "recollections" of your character were suitable for the scene or not. The difficulty of determining how to fit the back story into your writing can be among the most difficult of challenges.

This challenge is designed to help you make a conscious decision on how to write elements of back story into a story. We have provided facts for your back story. Decide which are essential to the telling of your story and fit them in as you deem best. Feel free to write any type of story you fancy, based upon these facts and others you create that will be necessary for your story. Add to these basic facts enough about your characters to make them interesting, but try to tell a real story, or at least enough of one to hook the reader into wanting more. You are limited to 1000 words. The facts you need to use can be found in this topic on our forums. Best of luck.

Selections from the January 2005 Writing Challenge

Dreamreel Dark
Excerpt from Man and Machine
Finely Tuned
Glimmer
Waterborne

The above stories were selected from the January challenge, which was to write about a unique Science Fiction technology.

Don't forget the February challenge due March 10:

Senses are powerful tools we use to experience the world. They are touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight (though one can argue that seeing the dead is a sense by itself). The senses often conjure strong memories. While writers rely on many sensory crutches to develop stories, this month's challenge is to use one of the lesser-used senses in a scene: the sense of taste or smell. Write a scene that uses the sense of taste or smell (or both) and the memories they conjure for a character in the scene. Please limit your challenge submission to 1000 words or less.

Dreamreel Dark

By Christie Bailey

I found Luce in a dreambar downtown.

Luce was a frequenter of the city's underground clubs and a connoisseur of all the newest vices—both legal and illegal. Everyone at the station guessed at it, although he humorously brushed around all the subtle (and not-so-subtle) inquiries into his [wild] private life. But he kept a low profile, stayed out of trouble, and clocked in on time, so the department kept him on. That, and his knowledge about the city's underground (and its plethora of entertainment technologies) was invaluable.

But this—

This was clocking on company time, and I was livid.

"Luce!" I hissed, descending on him.

He was plugged in at the bar, where he sat waving commands into the terminal. He looked up and smiled at me, and waved me to the stool next to him. "Hey, Cali!" he said, tapping his temple. "Whaddya know? I just tasted this great new reel, and I thought, 'Y'know, Cal would *love* this! It's sharp and macabre—just your flavor."

The blood rushed to my head. "If you think—" I cut myself off with an angry wave of my hand, then lowered my voice and leaned close. "Luce, I don't know *what* in the gods' names you think you're doing, but right now there is a killer on the loose, and you're in here jacking up!" I glanced distastefully around at the small, dim, crowded room.

He waved me off while unplugging himself. "Bear with me, wolverine. I've got a lead. Stick this in." He pressed the cable into my hand and held a finger to his lips, imploring.

Luce may have had a reputation for questionable pastimes, but he was also a dependable agent, and I trusted him. Grudgingly, I jacked in.

He smiled and inserted a datastick into the port. Then, when I gave a nod, he selected a file, and—

Reality became sharp and cloudy. I was *on a dark side street, buildings rising like canyon walls, the desert scent strong in my nostrils—this was MY territory, and the black dust that invaded every dark alley of the Dune City sang in my veins as I giddily hunted prey by the moonlight…around a corner, a small form huddled—I knew her to be a child—her blood smelled so sweet—she was swathed in rags, grey like the cobblestones, grey like the sky that was lit with the false-dawn-glow of city lights, grey as her face as she looked up at me, eyes wide, and I took her then—she was really the daughter of a rich merchant politician pig and I was cradling her eviscerating her with my black claws her steaming insides in the cold desert night her cries were bleats her fat rich hysterical mother was screaming from a window above she was at the end of the alley screaming.*

Dimly, beneath the alien consciousness that blanketed my own, I trembled.

And soon, I was sitting in the loud, crowded bar again, raising a shaking hand to unjack myself. I blinked, and I wanted to cry purifying tears—to purge myself. Then, I stilled myself. I said, "That's our killer."

"Yes." Luce smiled. "That's him."

Something niggled at the back of my mind. The dream—the mind—it had felt… What?

Then, I had it. "No," I said, slowly. "Not 'him.' Her."

Luce's smile widened. He nodded. Apparently, his own intuition had led him to the same conclusion.

I said, "That was the Shahakhet child. And also the child from the alley. But that wasn't a memory."

"No," agreed Luce. "That was a dream."

Luce had described dreamreels to me once. It was recent technology. He had explained in layman's terms how the brain signals were translated into digital code and recorded, how they were read by special computers and relayed to the viewer's skullchip, where they were changed back into electrical signals in her brain—back into the thoughts and cerebral images and sprays of hormones that made the dream. Viewing dreamreels was the ultimate window into someone else's mind. You *were* that person. And not only that, you were their *dream self*—their deepest self. Those who recorded their dreams—they were baring the core of their selves. They were showing themselves to others, open and bleeding and naked, and it made me cold thinking about it. They were the ultimate exhibitionists.

A half-formed thought snagged me. I froze. My stomach suddenly felt empty, and cold. I said, "Gods. She's a dustdamned *exhibitionist*. The murders—they're *art*."

Excerpt from Man and Machine

By Mike James

With his pre-flight complete, Kalvin received his Order Card and proceeded to the prep area. He entered a white, sterile chamber and removed his clothes, storing them in his personal compartment on the wall. Now, totally naked, he made his way to the flight deck, carrying only a green, organic hard drive and his Order Card. He crossed the flight deck, pondering the upcoming mission and what part they would play in the sortie.

As he approached his ship, the canopy methodically slid back to reveal the cockpit of his craft. He climbed in the ship and settled himself in the nondescript seat. No controls were visible; it was just another white, clean environment. Once he slid the hard drive into a large slot on his left and the Order Card into a smaller slot to his right, he began to relax.

Once his body had become motionless, the seat he was in began to grow, shaping itself around his naked form. It not only covered his body, but several probes were inserted into key areas, further enhancing the link between man and machine. After a few moments, his body was completely covered in molded plastic—the transformation was complete.

As the process happened, he let his thoughts drift back to experiences of his youth, back to Earth where, as a boy, he had run through green fields of grass while on a family vacation.

The ship giggled, "Ah, Kalvin, you always have some new experience for me. I especially like the greenery. What was it called?" the feminine voice asked.

"It's called Grass, Naomi," Kalvin thought, "and it grows up from the ground on Earth."

"Well, I like it. It looks beautiful and..." silence, probing, "…it feels so soft."

"It is," Kalvin remarked thoughtfully, wondering if he would ever feel it again himself. "It

is…"

He could 'see' all of the controls now. In a dreamlike state, his mind could, at a thought, read all of the displays, knowing the complete status of the craft and all that surrounded it. He went through the pre-flight in seconds and gave the order to fire the engines.

A small tremor resonated through his body as the fission propulsion system came to life. Feeling that kind of energy course through his human form was exhilarating to say the least, and for a moment he let it wash over him, reveling in the sensation of power.

"Kalvin," the ship said, "are you ready? Control has authorized our departure."

He gave an affirmative thought and braced himself for the launch, although it really wasn't necessary, as he was now actually part of the craft. The vehicle lurched forward, and within moments, the virtual displays flashed to life, noting all the friendly crafts in the area, approach vectors, craft statistics and dynamics, and most important, mission goals.

This mission was to secure a small frigate thought to be captained by an arms smuggler, relatively simple and routine these days. The front was light-years away, and out here, the only traffic one found was supply ships and smugglers.

On his displays, he could see the vessel, location, thermal scans and current speed. The other ships fell into formation around him as they moved to engage the ship. They had about two minutes until engagement.

"So, Kalvin, how have you been?" the female voice asked as they sped alone.

"Fine, I guess, and you?" he replied.

"Better now that you're here." The voice answered.

"Me, too," he thought, "Me, too…"

About one minute from engagement, the displays went white as a blinding flash of energy exploded off the port bow. They were blind for a brief moment, but the sensor quickly recalibrated to the current conditions and they could see again.

The tactical display was almost solid red in the direction of the flash. Enemy craft were everywhere.

Somewhere in all the information he felt her, "500 enemy fighter and two cruisers."

"An ambush." He thought.

"So it would appear," she replied.

With a combination of commands, he wheeled his ship into an intercept course, charged the main guns and relayed commands to his wing. They followed a perpendicular line in order to flank the opposing craft. It was the only choice they had.

The only Union ship in the area was theirs, a super-frigate called the *Lacedonia,* and she only held 100 ships when fully loaded. Right now, there were only twenty fighters deployed, including his.

He suddenly felt anguish and despair…

"Relax. We've been in tight spots before," he consoled, but in his heart he knew the truth—they were in trouble.

They engaged the enemy. Inside the ship, everything was quiet; the virtual displays and 'Naomi' was all he knew. Outside of the ship, which he couldn't see, the exchange was a blinding blur of weapons fire and ships wheeling about.

His plan had worked, and many enemy ships had been either destroyed or disabled. He had lost only three. He ordered them around for another pass, and reports came in that fresh fighters had been launched and they were on their way.

They formed up and fell into the second run, but the enemy had prepared and met them

with a barrage of firepower. Four more ships went down before they ever reached the line.

Two shudders…

"How are we?" Kalvin thought.

"Fine, we are only slightly damaged," she said, but the voice fell in pitch near the end.

The displays in his mind fluttered and he felt a burning sensation all over.

He was firing constantly now, trying desperately to weave in and around the almost steady stream of plasma that raced toward them. But he…they felt sluggish and lethargic.

Another shudder, now only one cannon was firing.

"Are we going to die?" the feminine voice asked.

"Yes," Kalvin thought.

"Kalvin, I love you," she said.

He let his mind drift back to the park and the green grass, lying there as a boy looking up to the sky, wondering…

Finely Tuned

By Virginia O'Dine

Stupid rock. Jack banged the rock against the doorframe. *I'm gonna be late for work. Again.*

Jack looked down at the smooth black stone fitting perfectly in the palm of his hand. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to relax his entire body. Jack concentrated on the warmth of the stone in his hand, trying to reconnect. He felt the tension slowly ebb from his shoulders and the tight band around his head loosen to a dull ache. The stone became warmer, and Jack felt a surge through his stomach in anticipation. He opened his eyes and looked up to the sky and…nothing.

"Stupid rock!" Jack yelled, turning back into the house. "Where the hell are the car keys? Why doesn't this thing ever work?"

Jack's wife came through the kitchen, frowning at him.

"Jack, relax. You know it won't work when you're all frustrated and tense." Shelley's perfect bob of blonde hair swung next to her creamy cheeks as she reached into the coat closet for a set of keys. "You can try again tomorrow. Gasoline is costing us a fortune, so you'd better get your temper under control."

Shelley took Jack's stone from his hand and traded it for the car keys. She placed the stone into a marble bowl on the side table near the door, then reached up to give Jack a peck on the cheek.

"Now go, you'll be late, having to drive all the way."

Jack merely frowned at her before walking out the door, slamming it behind him. He went around to the back of the house and into the storage container to get his car. The poor thing was covered in a fine layer of dust, only driven a few times in the past month, but it was still enough to cost a small fortune in fuel. Jack's face twisted into a mimic of his wife telling him once again how it was silly to spend huge dollars on a vehicle when they could use their stones for free. *Not*

everyone is so finely tuned, he thought.

Jack flopped into the seat of the car and took off with a squeal of tires. His brown eyes lit up as he turned on to the street in front of his house and slammed his foot down on the pedal, spinning the tires and throwing his body back into the racing seat. *You can't do that with a stupid rock.*

As Jack raced down the city streets towards work, meeting only a few other vehicles on the way, he looked up into the sky where it was nearly black with people. He chuckled as he spotted a collision out of the corner of his eye. The congested airways caused more minor injuries than vehicles ever did. People flying through the air with the power of the stones, with not even the sense needed to pass a driver's exam, weaving in and out of each other with no clear directions and each thinking they have the right of way, resulted in fist fights, many bloody noses and broken limbs, along with a rain shower of dropped objects on the land below. Jack had at first dodged and weaved around the stuff dropped on the ground, but now he kept a running tally to himself of the cell phones and briefcases that he swerved to run over with his car tires.

Jack sat back in the seat and thought back to his unsuccessful attempt this morning with his stone. He had personally chosen it, as most people do, feeling the warmth course through it as he held it in his hand. Shelley had talked him into hiking into the valley and choosing their own from a pile mined from the hillside, saving thousands of dollars compared to the prices in the city. The government had no control over these hundreds of 'mining claims,' as they'd come to be known, dotted all over the country, and the economy was in complete turmoil with the drop in oil and fuel consumption.

But the power of the stones wasn't the perfect answer, either. Many people could focus and channel the energy that created the unidentified power to be able to lift the body off the ground. It was controlled only by the focus of thought by the person holding the stone; nothing else tested in any scientific experiment would work at all. And yet there was a large portion of the population that could not make the stones work for themselves, no matter how hard they tried. Those who were still unsuccessful were embarrassed, left feeling as if they were outcasts. They were even more embarrassed when they had to pay the outrageous prices at the gas pump.

Jack swerved and heard another briefcase pop under his tires. He hated the pressure Shelley put on him to stop driving his car, but he really missed the feeling of acceleration and control. If only he could have that with the rock.

Jack stomped on the brakes, leaving a large trail of rubber behind him. He raced back to the house, wondering why he hadn't thought of it before.

* * *

Jack stuck his hand out the window to feel the wind, laughing uproariously. Shelley sat beside him, silent in disbelief, and possibly a little miffed at being dragged into his car. She kept glaring over at Jack's stone taped onto the dash. He looked over at her and yelled, "Loosen up, girl! It doesn't get any better than this! Oh wait! Yes it does!" Jack pushed the button on the roof to roll the sunroof back, and stood up on the seat.

"Isn't this great?? Why didn't I think of it before? The best of both worlds!"

He watched the landscape fly by beneath them and threw his arms up over his head. "Whoohoo! C'mon, baby! I'm driving, and it's not costing us a cent in fuel!"

Glimmer

By G. C. Dillon

Each of the ship's peripheral status lights darkened to a blackness like space itself as sinewy robotic arms disconnected power cables and data links that lead from the hulking cargo-husks to the sleekly defined glimmership.

Aileen Sobel watched each indicator light blink out. She sat in the pilot sliver, and in her own way, disconnected herself from *QuickSilver*—her glimmership. Gnat-like tugs pushed and pulled and generally nudged the *QuickSilver* and its cargo-husks toward the space station built on Brahe. Glimmerships could transverse the quantum wormholes in the solar system, but it was a clumsy child, which while able to soar, could never learn to crawl. The tugs maneuvered her into berth.

Brahe was a prime spot of real estate between Neptune and Saturn. Really nothing more than a giant stone in a stable solar orbit, it had a catalog and navigation number, which stretched out numerous significant digits, but humans used names to label things, including asteroids.

Aileen shipthought EXIT and the contacts with her skull withdrew; she was no longer *QuickSilver's* decision-making peripheral. Off with her harness, data streams and med-sensors, and she was human again. She took off the skullcap, releasing her hair to cascade down her reflective shellsuit. It was rust red with green forelocks. Not her natural colors, the tints were the result of a designer stand of DNA delivered to her follicles by an auto-amortizing vector virus. The sliver's hatch decompressed and Aileen was out onto the station's hanger deck. Still working, the tugs were moving her cargo-husks up to the top deck to be unloaded. Most of her cargo was gourmet foodstuffs—real hydroponic vegetables—not glop grown in the station's organic vats.

Aileen went to the pilot's kiosk. The device's scanner sought out her eyes and projected its display upon her retinas. She reviewed the Bill of Lading and verified she had her proof of delivery. With a biometric scan, she palm-signed the documents. A hardcopy spat out at her. She used her hand-computer and checked that the digi-version had been uploaded in full to the *QuickSilver's* databanks. Her fingers flew across the keypad and her itinerary flashed onto her rods and cones. She had twenty off-hours—as mandated by Solar Law—before she would start the trip back. She then searched for glimmer-ghosts.

Glimmer-ghosts were the ships and pilots long overdue and presumed lost in the incomprehensible void of the wormhole landscape. Someday, the glimmerships would ride the larger wormholes out beyond the Oort Cloud into Outer Space itself. For today, glimmerships swept across the solar system, keeping the routes open, AU by AU, from Pluto and Charon to Mercury and every unnaturally habitable rock in-between.

She found one name amongst the scrolling list of glimmer-ghosts: Kitan Ricci. The pilot of the glimmership *Mayuko* was overdue from a milk run between Europa and Titan. Overdue and presumed lost. When had she last seen Kitan? She had been becalmed light-hours out of Tycho, her instruments peering into the cosmos for the telltale quantum foam signature of the wormholes. She had expanded her airlock bubble and they had met in the naked void of open space between their ships.

Her hand-computer beeped for attention. The AI avatar from the lead tug was asking permission to take *QuickSilver* out of the station and into storage drydock. The area was a deep crater on the asteroid protected from meteoroids and hard radiation by a ribboned canopy constructed of spent uranium. Aileen acquiesced and turned to watch her ship rise above the deck and fly toward the port lock. She switched her display to the glimmership's fore-monitors. She watched her craft soar slowly across the pockmarked asteroid. The sprawling complexes of the space station freckled the orange regolith surface. Faint starlight glittered off frozen puddles of sulfur dioxide.

Aileen contacted Brahe's automated concierge and ordered a low g sleeping cubicle. She reached down and picking up her musette bag, headed for the nearest transit tube. Pausing at the dark maw a moment, she checked the location marker to suss out her route. She was at the *LambdaBase* complex. She stepped off to fall into the bottomless, topless pit. A weak graviton field grabbed her and pulled her along.

She knew a quiet place in the outer ring of *ThetaBase* where the proprietor actually cooked the wort when he was brewing—not just blasted it with microwaves—and served the finished product unfiltered. She stopped at her cube first to drop off her computer and luggage. She unlocked the privacy screen to find a gelatinous bed with storage drawers.

Aileen looked up to see a ghost walking. Kitan Ricci was coming toward her. Kitan was shouting something at her. She couldn't hear. He reached past her to turn off her—

* * *

—VR control. And the world dissolved. She was in the control pit of her supply ship. Confused, she looked about the hanger. Ricci stood on a gangway connected to her craft. He was shorter than before.

Aileen popped the opaque faceplate of her helmet. Her vision darkened in the dim chamber. She brushed strands of her mousy hair off her forehead. She noticed that her fingernails needed clipping. She looked back at the team of men in extra-vehicular sleds tugging her crates of dehydrated meals off the monkey-bars tangle of the cargo cages.

"I checked the shipment. Just needs your initials." Ricci handed her a clipboard and stylus. "Wanna go to the Swill Trough tonight?" he asked. Aileen grimaced. The yeast floating in that dump's ale gave off a rotten-egg stench.

Aileen unstrapped her legs from their restraints and climbed out of her "glimmership." By then she had begun to remember—remember that the real glimmerships only existed in the dream-reality used to occupy pilots during the long months of space flight. She remembered that this was reality.

Aileen realized that she was now a glimmer-ghost, lost from her true world forever.

Waterborne

By Mike Loos

The doctors tried to prepare Simon for the transition, but even they could only estimate the possible outcomes. Simon himself worried that if he listened too closely, doubt would creep into his mind. So he jumped at the challenge with characteristic abandon, waving away all the risks. And when he finally awoke in the acclimation tank, his natural reaction was that of a drowning man. He gasped for air, but his chest cavity was already saturated with water. Simon could no longer breathe as he once did, because his lungs were gone, along with any chance that he would return to the life he once knew.

On that day, Simon met the Colonel. He couldn't see the grizzled old veteran's face—the new eyes that the surgeons gave him had not properly healed yet—but he could hear the determination in his voice. *You are now our link to the Siunneil. The future rests in your hands.* Simon could only wonder if the Siunneil even cared. *Do they want a link back to us?*

When the great wormhole first appeared and the Siunneil ships materialized in space, scholars heralded a great new age. But the *waterborne* had no great interest in humanity; they were searching for a new home, one with great oceans that they could colonize. Planet Earth provided the perfect location. Soon after arriving, the massive Siunneil colony ships vanished into the sea. The wormhole disappeared as quickly, and mankind was left to hold its breath. Years passed without contact or activity. The interest of the world eventually turned elsewhere as the Siunneil appeared content to sit in their great ships at the bottom of the oceans. Great minds speculated that perhaps they had come here to hibernate or even to die. No one knew. Most didn't care after a while. *What harm can they really pose down there?*

It was men like the Colonel who needed to answer such questions. It was the military that attempted first contact, initially deploying unmanned submersibles—all ignored—and later sending brave volunteers. None were able to gain entrance to the great ships, but all reported seeing visions and hearing voices warning them away. *We learned that the Siunneil consider the air-breathing an anathema—a corruption*, the Colonel explained. *If we intend to interact with them, we must send someone like them.*

Accordingly, scientific teams were assembled and technology developed that could transform humans into beings that were more palatable to the Siunneil. As expected, many early subjects died in the process. All gave their lives believing that the Siunneil posed a grave security threat, one that must be neutralized. As costs spiraled higher and difficult questions were posed, Simon became the last to enter the tanks. If the process claimed him as well, the program would be abandoned.

Your lungs have been replaced with ones that can absorb oxygen directly from water. You will never breathe air again. The lenses of your eyes have been replaced by a clear organic polymer that is highly-curved. You will see in water as well as you used to see in air, even in low light. And that's just the start.

As he recovered from the surgeries, Simon spent his days swimming in the huge neutral buoyancy tanks that were once used to train astronauts and test spacecraft. Eventually, he moved to secret research stations where he could swim in the open water and learn to interact with marine life. Dolphins and orca became his constant companions as Simon began to distance

himself from other humans. His family was permitted to visit, but they found it very difficult to reconcile what he had become. Simon's isolation grew.

The Colonel had foreseen this possibility, even planned on it. With the insights that could be shared by someone with a foot in both worlds, he hoped to gain an advantage over his enemy. Simon decided that the Colonel feared him as well. *What sort of counsel might I provide in return to the Siunneil? How might they gain from their increased proximity to a member of humankind? Might I eventually even turn against my own people?*

After breathing water for six months, Simon decided that it was time to leave. The Colonel hadn't disclosed his plans yet, but Simon had had enough of doctors and scientists. While the rest of the research station slept, Simon strapped himself into one of the deep-water submersibles and fled. Although his departure triggered many alarms, Simon decided that he must have dived too deeply and too quickly to allow pursuit. Or that his sudden departure was the Colonel's preferred plan all along.

With his destination never in question, Simon piloted his submersible deeper and deeper until he could see the largest of the Siunneil ships directly below him. The vessel itself was the size of a small city, easily covering several square miles of ocean floor. Natural illumination was scarce at that depth, but the Siunneil ship was blanketed with multi-colored lights that shone brightly in the darkness. In one location, the lights throbbed steadily, becoming a beacon that urged him forward.

As he drew nearer, Simon expected to hear voices in his head—as previous explorers had reported—but he was disappointed to hear nothing. When he drew within meters of the ship, Simon could see that the surface was not metallic, as he might have expected, but actually quite rough, like pitted and pockmarked stone. Or coral. So he moved along the surface as if he were gliding over the face of a great reef, like a great sea turtle or eagle ray. Up ahead, Simon could see a steady decline in the surface leading to the entrance of a narrow cavern. Without hesitation, he followed the slope of the approach, driving forward into the opening as utter darkness enveloped him.

Staring at the dawn of a new day, the Colonel received the final report from the tracking beacons. *You are now our link to the Siunneil. The future rests in your hands.*

Collection

By Steven Richards

"There's a gentleman at the door to see you, Master Henley. Name of Peter Curtis. Claims his business is urgent."

"Oh? Never heard of him. Well, show him in, I suppose."

"Yes, sir." Ellings, Henley's young cook and substitute butler, turned on her heel and left the study, taking her city accent and the spicy smell of the kitchens with her. Master Henley carefully slid the book he was reading back into its slot on the study's west wall-cum-bookcase. He was not expecting visitors, but he'd never turned a stranger away without first talking to him.

As two sets of footsteps approached the study from the entrance hall, Master Henley became aware of a strange, wind-like sound. Before he could investigate, Miss Ellings and the visitor stepped into the study.

Water bubbled furiously for a few seconds, creating an enormous cloud of steam. Then the bucket caught fire and Ellings dropped it with a shout, clutching at her hands.

Curtis was slightly above average height, smooth-shaven, and on the whole, quite respectable-looking. He was dressed in traveling clothes—worn from use, but still in good condition—of blue and black. His right sleeve was on fire.

"Good heavens!" Henley exclaimed. "Miss Ellings, this man's arm is on fire!"

"Yes. Your...butler...was kind enough to point that out to me at the door." The man examined his shirt briefly. "Don't worry, though; it's just the sleeve. Fire-resistant, you know; cost me a bloody fortune, too, but I knew it'd come in handy someday."

"Indeed," said Henley, not altogether sure what Mister Curtis thought the term 'fire-resistant' entailed. The flames did seem to be confined to the *outer* surface of the sleeve, however.

"I offered him a vase, sir," Ellings added helpfully, half-hiding behind the visitor. "He said it could wait."

"Fetch a bucket for Mister Curtis, Miss Ellings," said Henley. Ellings left at once, not quite running. Running was not permitted in Henley Manor.

"I would offer you a seat, but, er..." Henley stared at the shirt. Fire-resistant cloth or not, the flames were steadily climbing toward the man's shoulder. "Would you like to take that off? I have a wastebasket here..."

"No thanks, I'm fine...well. Actually, it seems to be...stuck. Some kind of hex. But that's not why I'm here. There's a fellow outside who'd like to speak with you. He sent me to ask if you'd come out and talk with him." Curtis glanced toward the windows again, and lowered his voice. "*I suspect he's a mage*. Set my shirt on fire before I could say so much as 'beg your pardon, sir.' Almost ran into him out front, you see; apparently it's not safe to walk to work these days. He says I've got one minute to bring you out before he comes in on his own."

"Why doesn't he just come knock on the door himself?" Henley asked, growing more bewildered by the second. The flames had almost reached Mister Curtis' shoulder, and were

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Writing with a Co-Author

By Margaret Weis

One of the questions that Tracy and I are often asked is, "How do two people write together?"

Tracy's answer is: "She does the nouns and I do the verbs. We vote on adverbs!"

Tracy and I fell into working together back in the day when we were both employed at TSR, Inc., the makers of *Dungeons & Dragons*. I was the book editor in charge of the *Dragonlance* novel project and Tracy was the game designer for the *Dragonlance* game line. When we wrote the *Dragonlance* novel, I did the writing (since writing and editing was my background) and Tracy did the world-building, magic construction, etc. He read chapters behind me as I was writing and he'd add material or let me know if he thought I was veering off in the wrong direction. He would hand these chapters back to me and I would rewrite them from start to finish.

We determined at the very beginning that the most important thing for us in the partnership was that the book had one voice. This was and is our primary concern in working together. We didn't want the reader jolted out of the world by suddenly coming across a completely different style of writing. Some partners, however, find that the use of two different voices enhances their style and gives the book the feeling they want. This is something partners should determine at the outset.

When we develop new projects, Tracy and I spend several days in intense discussion on the plot, the characters, and the world. Our plot outlines are extensive, often running over forty pages in length for each book in the series. Once the plot is complete, I start the writing, leaning heavily on Tracy for advice, feedback, and design work.

This is how we work. I've known many successful partnerships that swap off writing. Some alternate chapters. Some write a few paragraphs and hand off to a partner to write the next paragraphs.

What are the advantages to working with a partner? Someone to talk to! Writing can be a very lonely pursuit, and it's great to be able to discuss the book with someone who knows it, who cares about it, and has a stake in it. (As opposed to friends or spouses who often nod off during the fiftieth description of the hero's co-dependent relationship with his half-sister!)

A co-author can bring a fresh perspective. I've found as a writer that sometimes I can't see the forest for all the damn trees in the way. A writing partner helps me look at things from a different viewpoint. Provides new and interesting ideas and insight.

What are the pitfalls?

Most partnerships split over the division of labor. One partner feels that he is doing all the work and that the other is "along for the ride." Often there is not equal division of labor in a partnership. One person may be extremely good at coming up with creative ideas, while the other person is the word-smith. The idea person may never set pen to paper. Is his share any less significant? Partners should work this out before they start, to avoid hurt feelings and battles later, always keeping in mind that writing partnerships are organic in nature—they change and grow as people work together. Be prepared to be flexible if you want the partnership to succeed.

The ability to compromise is important, as is the ability to be able to talk through

problems. Try to keep the partnership on a business footing. They say that building a house together can break up a marriage. That's nothing compared to writing a book! Keep personal relationships out of the writing process.

That being said, someone in the partnership needs to be able to say, "No!" If the partners are constantly bickering and arguing over every little detail, they'll never move off page 1. Determine at the beginning who is to be the leader and stick to it. If the partners have worked out a detailed plot structure in advance, this can help reduce the number of arguments.

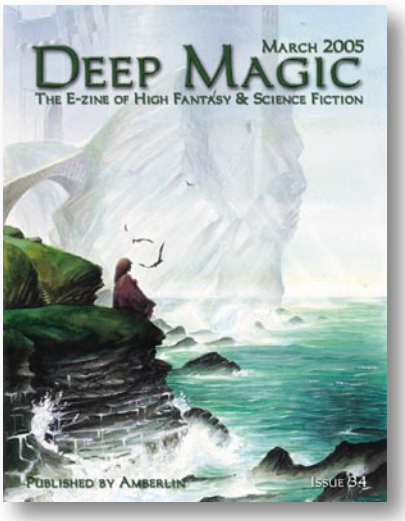
Don't write under a single pen name! Oddly enough, while it seems like this would solve the problem of whose name goes first on the book, this actually creates more problems than it solves. For example, who owns the name? I was once asked to testify in a lawsuit partners were bringing against another when the partnership ended and they were each vying for the name!

In another instance, two people using a single made-up name had a really difficult time moving on in their separate writing careers. They were constantly having to explain to people that they were this other person who didn't really exist. If each partner uses his own name, each can always branch out on his own, just as Tracy and I have done over the years. Publishing books on your own brings additional value to the partnership and does not detract from it. (The only problem we have is that many people think Tracy is a she and are always looking for "Ms Hickman" when we do book signings!)

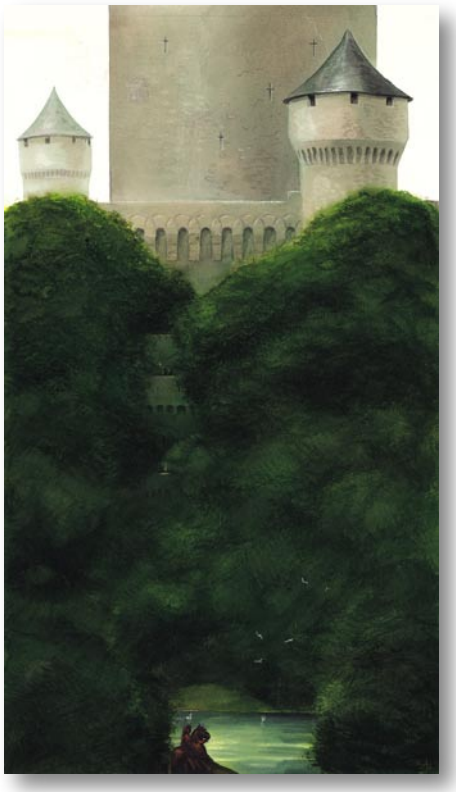
Tracy and I have been writing partners and friends for over twenty years. We've had our share of rocky moments, for we are two very different people. When all is said and done, however, we share many core values, and we each respect the other immensely.

What's most important for us or any partnership, we just plain have fun working together!

Featured Artist
Armel Gaulme



Name: Armel Gaulme
Age: 23
Residence: Paris, France
Marital Status: Bachelor
Children: None
Hobbies: A lot of hobbies. But my favorites must be writing-reading-drawing. Visiting museums, dancing, listening to music, riding bicycle, etc. etc...
Personal Quote: "So through the eyes love attains the heart, for the eyes are scouts of the heart." (Guiraut de Borneilh, quoted by Joseph Campbell)
Favorite Book or Author: I remember I was very impressed by Wuthering Heights, by Emily Brontë, even if I can't read it anymore. But I guess my favorite author is Philip K. Dick. My favorite book is the one I'm reading now. The next one will be my favorite, too, and so on... In a very different way, I'm quite fond of Thomas Harris' Hannibal.
Started Painting In: I'm not sure. I've probably been drawing and painting for more than ten years now, but I presume it's more relevant to say I started painting five or six years ago, when I got to ESAG-Penninghen, an art school in Paris.



Artist Most Inspired By: Can I say I'm not inspired by John Howe? No? I know I'm much inspired by his work, as long as I know him a bit: we are sort of long distance friends, and I still feel his influence. My other major inspirations come from the 19th century (John Singer Sargent, John Waterhouse, Ingres, Whistler, Alma-Tadema), 1900 (Mucha, Carlos Schwabe, Bilibin, John Bauer, Rackham, Dulac), contemporary illustrators (Alan Lee, Jeffrey Jones, Barry Windsor Smith, Kaluta, Vettriano...) and a lot more. I'm inspired by the Italian Renaissance (Raphaello, Tiziano, Michelangelo, Giambologna, Bernini) and from German painters (Holbein, Dürer). I love Neo-classicism by Canova, too.
Media You Work In: Mostly colored inks, oil paintings, color pencils, mixed together. I do my sketches with basic pencils.
Schools Attended: ESAG-Penninghen (Paris)
Other Training: Atelier Nicolas Poussin (Paris), when I was younger. The teacher there, Annette Guillon, allowed me to do everything I wanted to, which was pretty cool.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: "Il était une fée" fairy tales books (published by Adam Biro Jeunesse, France), Solaris (Canada), Faëries (France), Ubi-Soft (Myst 4

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landscape art), CD covers (Arbre Sec recordings), posters, logos...
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: My e-mail address is the easiest way: armel@armelgaulme.com or address: 54, bd Saint-Marcel 75005 Paris (France)
Website URL: www.armelgaulme.com.

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: Is it a common and not-that-original thing to say that "Star Wars" changed my life? First of all, I was almost born in a theater where my parents were watching "American Graffiti" by George Lucas, so I guess it's how everything started...

I remember watching the first three SW movies on video with a friend, one after the other (it was quite long, almost 7 hours), and thinking, "That's what I wanna do when I grow up." I was 9. A few days later, I went to a bookseller who had the "Art of Star Wars" series and I bought them (I hadn't enough money, so my parents lent me some money I gave them back later). Then I started to copy the vehicles, the landscapes, characters... I was a big Ralph McQuarrie and Joe Johnston fan. I even did a few matte paintings on glass because I had read they did their paintings on glass.

The next "big thing" was when I was 13 and I got the "Tolkien's World" book from Harper Collins. I went to W.H. Smith and found there a very old, dirty and second-hand looking copy of this book, which I still have (but now, every page falls off when I open it). I thought the Lord of the Rings was an overestimated book, so I didn't want to read it, and I started telling my own stories based upon the "Tolkien's World" illustrations. Since there were not enough paintings in it to fill my stories (which were about 1000 pages long—a very stupid story, actually), I did a lot of drawings myself. Then I read the LOTR, which was quite breathtaking, and I started to do a drawing for every chapter I read. I copied a lot of Marilyn Monroe portraits, too, because I found her very pretty. At this point, I knew I wanted to become an illustrator.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Maybe it won't last forever, but I've had the chance of doing commissions which are very close to the personal work I do. If I had to explain my work, I'd say I do illustrations in a certain old-fashioned way, all hand-made paintings, with no use of the computer. It's not that I dislike photoshop or painter, but I love watching an actual drawing, a real one, not a photocopy or a printed version. When I go to an exhibition, I want to see the actual paintings, not reproductions, and when I work, it's the same: I want to work on a sheet of paper, not an image reflected on a TV screen.

My paintings are very static and staid because I'm not that fond of movement. Even if I find Frazetta or N.C. Wyeth really amazing, with all the dynamic figures they painted, I would find it very embarrassing to do this myself. Let's just say it's like trying to have a conversation

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with somebody running. I don't find it very comfortable, and I still prefer talking in a more quiet environment, with a cup of coffee, for instance. It's the same with the characters I paint. I want to listen to the story of their life, in order to know them, who they are, what they feel, what they like, what their mystery is. Let me give you an example: if you offer a Shakira CD to a woman who likes opera, it's proof you didn't listen to her. You don't know who she is, and it may seem you're not that interested in her. When you have to paint a character, it's the same. You know, I love watching a woman doing nothing, even a bored woman, because that's often when I find her most beautiful. She reveals a lot about herself, and you can see plenty of small details that make her different from the other women next to her. It can be very touching. Once again, it's all about mystery, soul, phantasmagoria... I could tell you the same about landscapes, even if I don't have the same interests in women and landscapes, of course...

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?

A: When I want to draw a character, I find my inspiration in these little details I just talked about: a dress, an earring, a necklace, the shape of a mouth, the eyes, a flower in the hairs, the light coming on a shoulder, or what's hiding in the dark edges of a cloak. I prefer drawing women more than men, but not ethereal ones. I love reading and leafing through books about fashion of the 19th century or Renaissance. I love when it's elegant, sophisticated, but not too complicated. I like simple-looking things and I hate people who try to make a fuss, who want to put on airs. I love fashion when it makes people look good, and that's maybe why I find most current "haute couture" designers quite boring and laughable, as they make women look like exotic birds, nothing close to beautiful, living, breathing women.

If I'm asked to draw a landscape, a set, I open books about architecture (mostly Ancient Greece and Rome, Venice, Renaissance, Middle-Ages) or trees (I love trees, and I have a collection of nice-looking roots pieces at home). I don't use a lot of photographs as references, because I don't find it very interesting to copy photos. If I had to do a copy, I'd rather copy a painting by a great master. I like how Whistler used to paint his night pictures: he went out to see what a night landscape looks like, to *feel* it, and then came back to his studio where he would eventually paint his pictures, which are rather night feelings he got the day after, more than night realities.

Of course, I do illustrations for books, so the text itself is my major inspiration. I have the chance to work with Claudine Glot on the fairy tales collection for Adam Biro Jeunesse, and she writes in a very beautiful, picturesque way. It's very helpful and lovely to read.

Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)

A: This painting is called Tintagel and was made for the Morgan book, the second one in the fairy tales collection. It's the first illustration of the book. I like the concept Claudine Glot and Maylis de Kerangal (the publisher) had, which was to tell the whole life of a famous fairy, from

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the meeting of her parents to her death. Some kind of a fairy biography. So, I had to illustrate the first chapter, about Morgan's youth in Tintagel, the castle she lives in. Once a year, Tintagel disappears for a day, and I decided to do a semi-transparent castle, when it reappears the day after. You can see through it, and the horizon behind the rocks. I wanted the castle to be half-cut. I love when things are cut by the edges of the painting, to let the imagination do the rest. I like showing a bit, teasing, and I always try to let everyone imagine what they want. The same purpose led me to cut the large, thin bridge on the left. I could have drawn all of it, but I chose not to, so that you can only see a couple of stairs climbing up; maybe they do lead to the bridge (I think so), but who knows, maybe not...

It was a rather quickly made picture (2 days or so), and I decided later to do the last picture of the book as an echo of this one, with a boat sailing to Avalon, so that the whole story came full circle.

The major theme of the book was Morgan's solitude, so I tried to do paintings that reflected this feeling. This one shows that, even when she was still a child, Morgan was already a lonesome girl. She didn't aspire to be so, and she only got lonesome after being disappointed by her family and the ones she used to love. She started as a nice lady who wanted to do good. My favorite painting in this series is the one entitled "The Perilous Vale," because it is both soft and a bit frightening. I love the Morgan character, in the same way I love Medusa. Both beautiful women, I guess (I don't like the monster-like images of Medusa, which don't seem that believable to me), and both very lonely. Loneliness is a favorite theme of mine, especially when it concerns beautiful-looking people.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: My influences are all the illustrators, Symbolist and Pre-Raphaelite painters I discovered when I was a teenager. Now, I have acquired new influences, mostly from the Italian Renaissance, Whistler and portraitists like Sargent, and I feel my paintings are starting to look different from the ones I used to do about two years ago. I'm influenced by the ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, too.

It's not that I'm only looking for influences from the past (which could be a common and easy criticism), but I'm just influenced by the pictures/sculptures I find beautiful. And it's quite logical that I find more interesting artists over a period of twenty-two centuries or so, than over only a century. Most of the bad painters from the past are now forgotten, so we only keep the good ones in mind. But I love some modern abstract paintings, too, which give me some ideas for paintings I'll eventually do, maybe women portraits over abstract backgrounds.

For "Tintagel," my main inspirations were John Howe, Whistler, and Waterhouse's "Miranda (The Tempest)."

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Without a doubt, my greatest success in my (short) artistic career is the fairy tales collection

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by Adam Biro Jeunesse. Let's say this kind of books fits my personality and the themes I developed through my personal drawings. And working with the publisher, Maylis de Kerangal, is a great experience, partly because of her cultivated mind. She trusted me, and I'll always be indebted to her for this. She also knows so much about art that it allows me to talk about my influences with her. I can tell her, "This picture will be a kinda Bouguereau-style painting" and I know she'll understand how it will eventually look. I don't have to explain much about my pictures because we speak the same language. I remember the day I brought her my first finished painting (I felt a bit anxious—I'm not very self-confident) and she showed me two books by Rackham, genuine ones, from 1908 or so, and there was also a letter by Rackham himself. Of course, no need to say the books and the letters were fantastic, and I was very happy to see we loved the same illustrators.

From a more personal point of view, I have to say I'll be glad when I finish a book of mine, an illustrated novel (not for kids, for once!). It is very personal, and I already spent two years on the writing. I'm quite satisfied with it, for now. You can find some of its illustrations and photographs on my own website, under the "Sangréal" category (since "Sangréal" is how I entitled the book). If I had to summarize it, I would say it's about love, nature/civilization, religion, the city of Florence and Brittany.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Actually, I don't know much about the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre. I know it can seem a bit odd, because I do fantasy drawings myself, but as I told you a bit before, my main inspirations are older paintings from the last centuries. In the particular SF genre, I love some CG painters like Ryan Church, Erik Tiemens or Craig Mullins, who have a strong Sargent/Whistler influence. These painters paint with light and colors in a very dynamic way. I love it, even if, once again, I probably wouldn't like to paint on a computer myself.

I find Phil Hale paintings very interesting, as he doesn't create classical Sci-Fi pictures, a bit like Jeffrey Jones and John Harris (two fantasy art gods). It seems to me that they're not that interested in big and detailed spaceships, giant baroque castles, enormous swords, too heavily ornamented armours. They paint fantasy pictures as if they lived in a fantasy world, and I find it more interesting. It seems more real, not like a great absurd funfair. Their images don't look like pictures taken by a tourist on a trip to a distant fantasy world and who'd be impressed by every little thing he'd see. When you live in a real fantasy world, you're no more interested in those tawdry gadgets a lot of illustrators love to paint. To tell more about Hale and Jones, I like their outwardly simple style, which makes me very jealous...

John Howe, Alan Lee, Brian Froud, French illustrator François Roca (who's inspired by N.C. Wyeth and Waterhouse) and a lot more are the living proofs that we can still do classical fantasy illustrations. I hope there will be a good balance between CG/traditional mediums illustrations, because no manner is better than the other. You just have to paint with the medium you feel best with.

Knitting with Water

By Nigel Atkinson

"So what is time? If no one asks me, I know; if they ask and I try to explain, I do not know."
-- St. Augustine, Confessions, XI, 14.

Above the tree line, the dry Himalayan air turned chilly. Gusts like slivers of ice slipped through Gore-tex and eiderdown and stabbed the microsutures embroidering Jack Drake's belly. The cold bit at his toes and fingers and opened cracks in his lips, but he was so tired he hardly noticed. Jack and his new friends had been walking for ten days. They were obviously taking him by the pretty route. He wondered if this was another stage in his long-drawn-out punishment for a murder he couldn't remember committing.

The Ghurkhas were all members of a unit seconded to Archbishop Susan's own regiment. They nodded and smiled at Jack's questions, but refused to enlighten him. Eventually he gave up and concentrated on fighting his recent habit of tucking his right elbow under his ribs, unconsciously cradling his new liver. When he thought he had reached some sort of equilibrium between cold and exhaustion and his core of bloody-mindedness, it began to snow.

Reality splintered—again, and again, and again, and—he was lost in an infinity of mirrors. Infinite variations of his tessellated existence. From the Big Bang to the heat death of every possible universe, Jack was ubiquitous.

Around noon of the twelfth day, they crested a small hill. It was like every other one of the hundreds—or was it thousands, Jack wondered gloomily—they had climbed. Except a yellow-clad Pan-Buddhist monk waited on the path, apparently oblivious of the icy snow under his sandaled feet and the chill wind whipping his robe. He exchanged silent greetings with the Ghurkhas who, without a word to Jack, turned around and walked away along the path they had just travelled.

"I know," Jack said, exasperated. "This is a bus stop. Is one due? They come in threes, you know."

The monk smiled. "It is said that a teacher was once disturbed in his studies by a bandit who demanded his money or his life. 'Do not disturb me. You will find my money in that small sack near the door,' the teacher said. The bandit thanked him and made off with his loot. Later the bandit was captured and the teacher was called as a witness. 'I do not regard this man as a thief', the teacher said. 'I gave him my money freely, and he humbly thanked me for it.' When the bandit was released from prison, he became the teacher's most devoted student."

"And your point is?"

"Now would be a good time to practice humility."

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Why I love Deep Magic

By Jeff Wheeler

I've been waxing nostalgic lately. As we get closer to June, I realize that we are completing three years as an e-zine. It has caused me to ponder why I'm involved with Deep Magic and why I love it so much. It allows me to reflect on where I had hoped we would be and to imagine where we are going. I think it is fitting to stop every once in a while and look back down the road you came on. There are always surprising twists and bends, some unexpected detours. Nearly four years later, I have not arrived where I started out to go. But what a ride it has been so far. I've loved it.

I wanted to be part of Deep Magic in the beginning for several reasons. I was tired of the publishing process – the faceless bureaucracy of the industry, the "no agent, no chance" mentality. I was also tired of reading some of the latest fantasy authors and what I was perceiving to be a steady trend towards darker fiction – more adult themes, more skin and sex, more authorial cruelty to characters. It was getting too edgy for me. I missed the fare of my teenage years and the authors who inspired me to begin with, like Terry Brooks and Lloyd Alexander. I missed good old-fashioned clean fiction, books that I could curl up on the couch with and get lost in new worlds for a few hours. Heaven knows the tedium of a desk job. As an adult, I felt I was lost. It seemed to me that the newer authors weren't writing for young people any more, but had geared to those of us who had grown up on the genre. And there was a noticeable bent towards the lewd and the vulgar. Character development was becoming the art of torturing your main characters without remorse.

As I kicked the idea of Deep Magic around with my two best friends, Jeremy and Brendon, I thought that perhaps there were others in the world who were a little like us—tired of the repetitious plots, hungry for new adventures and dazzling new characters. Since I can't speak for Jeremy or Brendon (nor would they want me to), I'll limit my comments here to my own thoughts. Why did *I* want to be part of this…this…this project? We didn't even have a name for the e-zine yet, and our first attempts are almost laughable when I think about how much the name Deep Magic means to me now.

I secretly hoped for several things. The first, that Deep Magic would be the means to acquaint zillions of readers with my writing, that there would be general rioting around the globe and impatient readers spamming me until I finished another story or novel, and that Del Rey or Tor or Bantam Dell would come banging on my door and permanently maim each other with ball point pens to be the first to sign me up. An ambitious goal? Perhaps. But then I've always tended to be a little melodramatic (just ask my wife). Yes, I hoped in my heart of hearts that Deep Magic would be the avenue for my success as a writer. My springboard to fame and stardom. Well, until I realized that new authors rarely succeed in making a lot of money and that I'd better hunker down in my desk job if I wanted to keep feeding my kids.

If I were to judge my success by that measurement alone, then I'd probably be depressed right now. That does not describe my temperament at all. Fortunately, I value the experiences of the journey much more than not having arrived at a specific destination I had set out to reach. Looking back now, I see things through different eyes. Before I started, I thought my writing was good enough to make it in the big-time. Now I realize that I've still much to learn. Four years

ago, I didn't even have a teacher. Now I'm the pupil of some of the best writers in the industry. And that is one of the biggest reasons why I love Deep Magic.

I look at who I was back then. My only claim to fame, so to speak, was that I was friends with author Sharon Kay Penman, who writes brilliant historical fiction. She was my mentor, my champion, the reason I studied medieval history in college, and someone who gave me the confidence to believe in myself. I own all of her books in hardcover. My wife and I have even been to dinner with her twice – once in San Francisco and once in Monterey. I thought I was a pretty special dude. Now I see how truly blessed I am.

Because of Deep Magic, I've been to New York City and met face-to-face with the editors at Bantam Dell. I have the personal e-mail addresses of many fantasy authors whom I admire: Robin Hobb, Cecilia Dart-Thornton, Kristen Britain, Guy Gavriel Kay, David Farland, Margaret Weis, just to name a few – and yes, I am bragging. All of these authors have taken the time to be interviewed or to conjure up a writing craft article for the e-zine. These are incredibly busy people – you should see some of the e-mail I get from them, how they've apologized for taking so long in writing something for you.

I know the editor-in-chief of Del Rey, and she has generously performed several favors for the e-zine. I know the marketing chief at Tor – in fact, I just finished reading an advanced copy of *The Iron Tree*, which they graciously sent me. Not only do I get to read great new fiction – I get to read it (along with books like Sarah Ash's *Lord of Snow and Shadows*) ahead of the general public. I've come to see some of the faces behind the nameless, faceless bureaucracy of the publishing world. And I've learned that they are people too, just like anyone else. And their biggest fear, and one that I poignantly share, is that you – the reader – won't like their latest creation.

Do you really realize how much power *you* have in this industry? There are only so many books that you can read in a year, whether you are a fantasy fiction junkie or just a casual dip-the-toe-in-the-water kind of reader. It is all of you, added up together, the sum total, that make or break new authors, that make or break new e-zines. Never forget the power that you have. Your recommendation to a friend of a good book or series is what fuels this industry. You are the proverbial "nut" that everyone is trying to crack. I say that in the best of senses. I don't, personally, think you are nuts.

Three years ago, we drafted a mailing list of about ninety others like you (pecans, almonds, maybe a walnut or two). Yes, ninety. Nine-zero. We pulled together everyone we could think of who might care, even a smidgeon, about the kind of fiction we intended to publish on a monthly basis. We recruited some of the best budding authors we could get our wily hooks into. For deep down, I believed at the time that I was not (*gasps*) alone in the universe of my frustration, that there were other authors who were tired of the current fare, anxious to get published, and lacking a vehicle where they could share their stories. I wasn't wrong. Authors have come in droves. Some are fantastic. Many are decent. Quite a few need a lot of work still. Reading their submissions has been inspiring and, at times, drudgery. But I have learned so much in the process. Not only have I been tutored by some of the best professional authors in the business, I've also been tutored by many of my fellow amateurs who have graced these electronic pages.

A third thing that I've loved about Deep Magic (and I know most of you share this love because of your feedback in our latest survey) is the artwork. From the very beginning, it has been important to me that our artwork is above the cut. In the beginning, I felt like I had my hat in my hand, begging famous artists to let us use their work for free. I've gotten quite good and

rather shameless about begging. It works wonders, especially with an operating budget as tiny as ours. At first, I think we were pitied. But as more and more saw the quality of this e-zine, as more and more readers flooded our subscription list (we are almost to 1400 now), we became a place of…shall I say?...prestige. It is not very difficult getting artists to be part of Deep Magic any more. Some have even said it is an honor to be featured along with some of their esteemed peers. We use pieces of art that have been sold to other magazines or sources, true. But I'm sure most of you are delighted each month when you see our latest offering. Artwork truly inspires readers and writers alike. Whenever we offer a writing challenge to create a story based on one of our past covers, we always get the most submissions. There is just something about the magic of paint and pixels that stokes the imagination.

We have grown. My, how we have grown. And we would have shut down ages ago without the support of our staff. We continue to get excellent volunteers to help the e-zine thrive. There is no way on earth that Jeremy, Brendon, or I could keep Deep Magic going on our own. We would mothball the site in one month without the time and talents and passion that our staff (both past and present) has brought to the cause. We have had book reviewers, copy editors, software engineers, self-proclaimed geeks, scientists, teachers, grad students, and many, many more. All along the way, we have been supported by courageous and dedicated volunteers. Thank you. From the bottom of my heart. You are another reason I keep doing this.

Do you see now why I love Deep Magic so much? Why I give up my free time to help coddle it along? But to be honest, I believe our best years to still be in front of us. There are tens of thousands of readers out there who don't know about us. I'm thrilled every time we get an e-mail from a reader in Eastern Europe, South America, or the Pacific. Fans all over the world drop by to visit and download the latest issue. We have only scratched the surface.

When I think about the future, and what we *could* become, I get all tingly inside. Maybe it's the ice cream I just ate. But what I want to do for the next moment is try and paint the picture in my mind for you. I want you to imagine what Deep Magic could become. What would happen if we could attract even better writers by paying professional rates someday? We miss out on hundreds of writers who do not even consider sending their stories to us because we do not pay anything. What if we got stories, occasionally, from the Robin Hobbs of the world? And we would not change our submission guidelines either – we would only accept stories that were safe places for minds to wander. Imagine if we could influence the industry, just a little bit. To show the editors in New York that there is hope for hopeful fiction. Imagine with me, just for a moment, if we could pay professional rates to our cover artists. Imagine the kind of covers we could do in the future if they were done especially for you, our readers? No stunning leftovers, but original masterpieces dedicated to the vision of Deep Magic. Imagine commissioning paintings based on our stories. Imagine ten thousand monthly readers. Imagine twenty thousand. Think what could happen if we could get our hands on some of the latest technologies, especially internet portal technology. Imagine being able to customize your Deep Magic experience, to visit other realms of fantasy or science fiction that can be experienced by the web instead of the written page. Worlds to explore, characters to experience, other readers to meet in our message boards. The possibilities are limitless.

This is why I haven't given up yet. The potential is there. You, our readers, are the backbone of Deep Magic. If you didn't keep coming, or stumbling onto us, or telling your friends about us, we would not see the kind of growth in readership that we have. You are the best part of the Deep Magic experience. As the one who compiled our last survey results, I got a little glimpse into who you are. You hail from Narragansett, Rhode Island, to Riverside, California.

From Melton, Australia to Heraclion, Greece. If Deep Magic is going to succeed in the future, it will be through you. If any part of the vision I tried to paint appeals to you, then realize that you have the power to make it happen. Never forget the power that you have.

See you again next month, friends.

With Eyes Open...

By Michael P. Dunn

I covet truth;
Beauty is unripe childhood's cheat;
I leave it behind with the graves of youth.
-- William Blake

With long practiced skill, she blocked out the emotions that boiled across the diner and focused on her own anger and betrayal. Her brown eyes locked onto the man on the other side of the table. "Is there something else you wanted to say about your former marriage?"

He was calm as he looked up from his menu, but Mira Frayne could feel his surprise, knew it as clearly as if it had registered on his face. Her empathic sense was stronger at close range; even the hurricane of conflicting emotions that raged around them couldn't conceal him. She watched him pick up his water glass, carefully take a sip, then dry his fingers with equal care. "Well, Adam? Is there anything else?"

Adam shifted, finally beginning to show discomfort. "What else is there to say, Mira? My marriage is over. I divorced my wife. Is something wrong?" His face never changed expression, and his voice was flat, nearly monotone. His surprise faded quickly, replaced by supreme confidence. Confidence in himself, in his ability to tell people what they wanted to hear, to keep himself content, to lie with a straight face.

There had been enough of them for her to know when someone was trying to bury the truth under layers of emotions. Mira knew how to poke and prod the minds of her clients, to get them to reveal the truth

Wrong? Oh yes, there's something wrong, you lying sack of… Mira quickly reined in her emotions. She had learned early on that when experiencing something as strong as anger, she would start projecting the emotion, involuntarily influencing the people around her. The last thing she wanted was Adam guessing her emotional state.

Mira had encountered too many people like Adam in her professional life, people who came to her for counseling, even if they weren't aware of the need. There had been enough of them for her to know when someone was trying to bury the truth under layers of emotions. Mira knew how to poke and prod the minds of her clients, to get them to reveal the truth. She was quite good, so it came as a shock to her that Adam had lied to her, without the slightest hint of guilt, and she hadn't suspected until it was too late.

"Let's just say I had a feeling, Adam. I always act on my feelings; they're usually right." Mira's eyes narrowed as she dug into Adam's emotional landscape, trying to find some weakness. "Okay, then let's play a little game. I'll throw out some hints and you tell me who I'm talking about."

Adam shook his head, his neutral expression twisting into an insulting smirk. "Let's not. I'm not in the mood for games. You're right. There is something else I have to say about my

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Announcing two new Amberlin Books releases! *Silverkin*, sequel to *Landmoor*, is written by Jeff Wheeler and completes the Landmoor Duology. *Deeper Magic: The Second Collection* contains selected short stories from our second year of publication. Both books are available through Amazon.com and other online retailers. Click the cover images to order.

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Silverkin

The anticipated sequel to Landmoor has finally arrived, continuing the adventures of Thealos Quickfellow.

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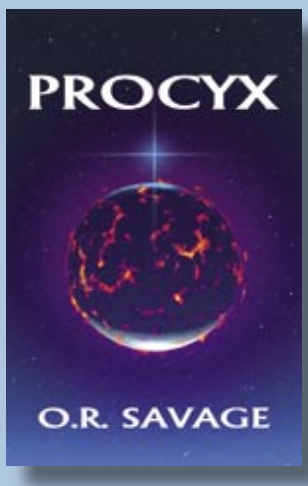

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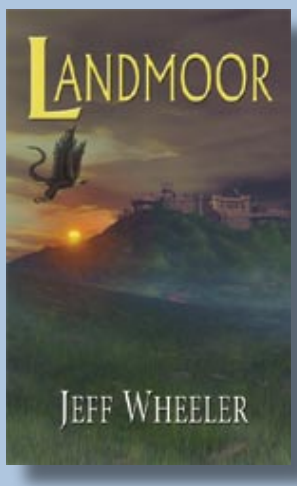

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ISBN: 1586490028

AMBERLIN BOOKS

Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Iron Tree (The Crowthistle Chronicles Book 1)

By Cecilia Dart-Thornton

The Iron Tree is a creation of magic in the heart of the city of Cathair Rua. Nestled within its thorny branches is a mysterious jewel that no mere mortal can free. But the tale of *The Iron Tree*, by Cecilia Dart-Thornton, is a love story, a tragedy, and a promising beginning to a masterful new trilogy.

The main characters are Jarred and Lilith, a young man and woman from different villages in vastly different kingdoms. Jarred is from the impetuous desert kingdom of Ashqalêth, with its hot winds and fierce sand storms. He lives a charmed life and spends his early years wondering why an amulet given him by his father protects him from all harm. His father's early abandonment of his family fuels Jarred's curiosity until he is determined to leave his village and travel the world of kings, carlins, and druids with his friends, hoping to discover more of his heritage. He learns it, of course, and it is nothing he could have imagined.

Lilith is from the marshes of Slievmordhu, a poor land but rich with water, a land with colorful festivals and traditions. Her mother and grandfather are afflicted with a great curse, for as they grow older and start having children, they begin hearing ominous footsteps that continue to get closer until the victims go mad. When Jarred and Lilith meet and fall in love, they must discover the true source of Jarred's invulnerability and the marsh-woman's curse. And fate, with its fickle pointy thorns, shows how both revolve around the mysterious Iron Tree and its unreachable jewel.

Readers of Cecilia's *Bitterbynde* trilogy will find welcome familiarity with the setting. The world of Tir is not the world of Aia, but its sister. It, too, is haunted by wights, both unseelie and seelie—creatures malevolent and benevolent of faerie that co-inhabitant the world. Humans who fail to learn the secret rules that govern the eldritch ones often meet with disaster. Those who do are often richly rewarded. These rules and lore are woven together with the story, so that the reader does not need any knowledge from the *Bitterbynde* to understand the comings and goings in *The Iron Tree*. As a separate trilogy, it stands alone.

Having enjoyed her previous trilogy so much, I was curious whether the author could maintain the innovation in her newest work. It thrills me that she did. Her characters have depth and humanity, and the richly detailed setting shows that she has already mastered the craft of storytelling. The language of her writing is bold and beautiful, words chosen for the sounds and colors they produce. And as with her previous works, she has sharp endings that accelerate the pacing and mystery, making it impossible to put down. The story continues to haunt you, like unseen footsteps, after the final pages are over and the book is put down. Ms Dart-Thornton continues to be one of the most gifted authors I've read in recent years. She even makes tragedy satisfying.

Possible objectionable material: None. Certainly a safe place for minds to wander.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

A College of Magics

By Caroline Stevermer

It is inevitable, in these days of Harry Potter, that any book set in a school of magic will be compared to Ms. Rowling's series. A book with the title *A College of Magics* seems doomed from the get-go to be held up in comparison. And indeed, in the most recent edition from Tor's Starscape, there is a cover quote by Jane Yolen, comparing the book to Harry Potter. But Caroline Stevermer's *A College of Magics* ends its comparison there: Harry Potter has more in common with *Tom Brown's School Days* than it does with this sophisticated fantasy of manners.

Faris Nallaneen is the heir to the small European dukedom of Galazon in the late Victorian/early Edwardian era. Automobiles are just coming in, and the romance of *The Prisoner of Zenda* is still in the air. Faris' Uncle Brinker, the acting regent of Galazon, wants to get rid of Faris, so he sends her off to Greenlaw College, a finishing school for young ladies, and also the college of magic from the title. At Greenlaw, Faris meets Jane Brailsford, a British student who shows a strong aptitude for magic, something Faris seems to be lacking. The two become fast friends.

Also at the college, however, is Menary Pagenall, whose family rules the nearby dukedom of Avarill, which has aspirations to be a kingdom. Faris, however, is the true heir to the kingdom that would come about from the united dukedoms, and so Menaris plots to get rid of Faris.

The story quickly moves beyond Greenlaw as Faris is called back to Galazon. Both political and magical intrigue ensues, culminating in a mighty magical battle upon which hangs the fate of the world.

The aforementioned Jane Yolen quote is expanded on the back cover and states that the writing is 'lyrical… and emotional.' And indeed it is. The characters of Jane and Faris both start off with cynical and distanced attitudes to the world around them, reflecting very much the emotional detachment of Edwardian society. By book's end, however, both girls have grown into young ladies who know their places in the world and are confident in that.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

Shadowmancer

By G.P. Taylor

Since we've been talking about Harry Potter comparisons, it seems only right that we should also review G.P. Taylor's *Shadowmancer* which was being heralded as the next big publishing phenomenon after Harry Potter. It did not, however, live up to the hype and it's no surprise.

Shadowmancer is set in 18th-century York in northern England. In the environs of the ancient town of Whitby lives the vicar Obadiah Demurral. At first glance, Demurral appears to be a typical hypocritical member of the clergy, one of many that besmirch the otherwise honest and faithful men of God. Demurral, however, is even worse: he wants not only to control his village (which he does—and it is indeed *his* village, since through dishonest dealings, he has managed to procure most of it as his own) but he wants to control the world. And he might just manage to do it, for Demurral is so far from being a true man of God that he is a shadowmancer, an evil sorcerer who can conjure the dead.

Young Thomas Barrick is one of the villagers who has been made destitute by Demurral's wickedness. One day Thomas publicly denounces Demurral and so Demurral, petty man that he is, decides to kill the 13-year-old boy. Thomas manages to elude Demurral's killers and in the process befriends Raphah, an African who has come to England to stop Demurral.

With the help of fellow village girl Kate Coglan, Thomas and Raphah work to overthrow Demurral. To their advantage, they have Riathamus, the god that Raphah serves, looking out for them.

Thus ensues a game of cat and mouse that eventually results in a cosmic battle of demons and angels.

Other reviewers have already pointed out that *Shadowmancer* reads like Charles Williams for children. The position of the characters to supernatural faith is very similar to what one would expect in one of Williams' supernatural thrillers. The high quality of Williams' prose, however, is lacking in *Shadowmancer*. Very little time is spent developing characters, and so the characters tend to 'speechify' rather than speak realistically. Paradoxically, this gives the characters' speech a lesser, rather than a higher, tone. In short, it sounds fairly fake.

Additionally, whereas in Williams the faith being written about is infused in the very being of the work—take away the faith and the work collapses—Taylor's characters, with the exception of Raphah, seem to be insincere about their faith; this is mostly due to the poorly drawn characters.

This book was a big hit in the UK, but the writing is so poor that I must conclude it was as much a matter of slick marketing than it was a matter of a great book. Drawing a comparison one final time to Harry Potter, we see that Potter went from hardly being known to being one of the most successful children's series because of its enjoyable stories, whereas *Shadowmancer* most likely will fade from the shelves, having started with a bang.

Possible objectionable material: none

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

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creeping across his shirtfront. “Miss Ellings, where is that bucket!”

“Right here, Master Henley,” said Ellings, arriving at the door.

“Oh, thank you,” said Curtis, and stuck his arm in the proffered bucket. Water bubbled furiously for a few seconds, creating an enormous cloud of steam. Then the bucket caught fire and Ellings dropped it with a shout, clutching at her hands. Curtis’ arm was still ablaze. “Drat. Like I said, I think it’s some kind of hex. Or curse. I think it’s just a hex; he didn’t look angry enough to off and curse me just for almost bumping into him.”

“I suppose I should talk to him,” said Henley. “Just leave the bucket there, Miss Ellings. The marble should be fine.” Trembling slightly, he stepped past Curtis and into the entrance hall.

Before he could take another step, the front doors crashed open, spilling sunlight into the hall. A small man in black robes stood in the doorway, and even un-attuned as Henley was, he could see the magical energy flowing around the intruder. Some of it was dripping from his hands, discoloring the marble on the floor where it had begun to pool. Henley looked at this and scowled.

“We have a knocker, my good fellow,” he said, and pointed at the door. “Most people do. I suggest you learn how to use them. Now, put out this man’s arm and tell me why you are here.”

“I did tell you to hurry,” the mage chided. Then he seemed to reach across the room without moving an inch and *twisted* at something in the air near Curtis’ arm. The flames died down slowly, leaving a charred expanse of fabric from wrist to collar. Curtis sighed and relaxed, just a little.

“Excellent,” said Henley. “My name is Victor Henley. I’m the owner of this property. You are?”

“Trowbridge,” said the mage. “I’m here on behalf of Dillin, Trowbridge & Associates Debt Collection and Investigative Services. Do—“

“I’ve heard of you; hired you last year, didn’t I? But I don’t have any deadbeats at the moment, thankfully.”

“I’m not here to advertise.”

“Oh.”

“City records indicate you are currently employing one Jane Ellings in the kitchens here at Henley Manor. Early twenties, thin, red hair?” Miss Ellings, who had been sweeping up the remains of the bucket, now froze, staring at Henley and Curtis from within the study. They didn’t so much as glance in her direction. Blank faces. “Am I ringing any bells here?” the mage prodded.

“I haven’t been to the kitchens for quite some time,” said Henley. “The housekeeper hires assistants as she sees fit. We can look, if you’d like.”

As Master Henley turned to lead the mage down the hall, his eyes made cursory contact with Jane’s, then flicked to the right. *Hide*, he was saying. She didn’t need to be told twice. She leaned the broom against the wall beside the door and crossed the room as quietly as leather on marble would allow. A mere second before the mage passed the doorway, she ducked behind one of the study’s two massive red armchairs. Her left hand closed slowly on the leather band around her neck. Below, in stark contrast to the crude band it hung from, was a dark pendant in the shape of a raven, beautifully and carefully crafted from some crystalline material.

Surely they didn’t know that it had been her.

The mage stopped beside the study and looked curiously at the neat pile of ashes inside. "What's this?" he asked.

"That was a bucket of water," said Henley. "For Mister Curtis' arm."

"Who swept up the ashes?"

"I did." Henley tried to look impatient.

"You do your own sweeping?" the mage asked, giving Henley a sharp look.

"Only in the study. I have a large number of valuable books inside. I've found I lose less of them if I dust the room myself." Henley was unable to hold back a slight cringe at the thought of Mrs. Bennell hearing him so blatantly impugn the staff's honesty. The mage, however, was inspecting the interior of the study and didn't notice. By the time he turned around, Henley was wearing his impatient face again.

"Indeed," said the mage, faintly amused, and returned to the hallway. "The kitchens, then."

Henley led the way. Curtis, perhaps not wishing to arouse the ire of the mage again by venturing past him, followed.

Jane waited for the footsteps to fade a little before she started breathing again. *Hide*, Master Henley had told her with his eyes, but now what? A search of the kitchens wouldn't take long.

Leaving the Manor seemed to be the only option. No last paycheck, no 'you're fired,' no 'I'm getting married, Master Henley, and moving to a nice house on the beach.' Just *'hide'* and the sudden realization that the other side of the world might not be far enough.

She slipped off her shoes and padded across the room, dropping them in the wastebasket as she passed it. No sense leaving them in the open where they could get Master Henley in trouble. She went to the window and peered out through the crack between the curtains. As she had expected, the mage had brought backup. Two bruisers loitered by the gate, and a third man—another mage, judging by his clothing—across the street watched the Manor vigilantly. No doubt the back entrance was similarly guarded. The debt-collectors were as thorough as they were persistent.

She was effectively trapped in the study. The front doors were wide open, allowing the men outside a clear view of the entrance hall. Had Master Henley been here, he would have said something like, 'just use the secret passage. Fourth column, second shelf, *The Illustrated History of Metallurgy*.' But he wasn't here, and perhaps there were no secret passageways. The Manor was only a few hundred years old, after all.

"Jane, you ninny," she whispered. *Think!*

"So what did the girl do?" Henley asked, pushing open the door to the kitchen. Two maids and the gardener were eating lunch inside. They got to their feet hastily at the sight of their employer and two visitors entering the room. The mage did not reply to Henley's question. His eyes darted from face to face inside the kitchen.

"Good day to you, sir," said the gardener.

"Hello Willis, ladies," Henley replied. "We're looking for Miss Ellings; has anyone seen her?" He tried and failed to learn telepathy on the spot. The gardener shrugged, but one of the

maids spoke up.

"Last I saw her, sir, she was in the hall, dusting and watching the doors."

"Oh?" Henley managed to look genuinely curious. "She's a kitchen assistant, isn't she?"

"Head cook, Master Henley," said the gardener, giving him a faintly curious look.

"And why would the head cook be dusting the hallway?" Henley demanded. "Are you sure? Red hair, eh, twenties, you said?" He glanced at the mage, who nodded darkly.

"That's her," said the maid. "If you didn't see her in the hall, she may be in the washroom."

"Which doesn't explain what she was doing in the hall in the first place," said Henley, glowering.

"Duncan's out on a bit of a vacation, sir," the other maid replied. "Mrs. Bennell's given his duties to Jane 'till he gets back."

"Why was I not informed?"

"You can interrogate your servants later, Henley," the mage interrupted, and left the kitchens without another word. Henley followed him quickly, pushing past Curtis. The latter was quite happy to stay behind with the maids and, less happily, the gardener.

High visibility at all exits. No weapons, save for a broom. Every scenario she'd run through her head involved some sort of mad dash and near-certainty of capture. Two exits, five directions, five dead-ends.

And then Jane remembered why the debt-collectors were chasing her in the first place.

"She's dangerous," said the mage, replying to Henley's second attempt at discovering the nature of Jane Ellings' crimes. "She's a thief, a brigand, and was once an apprentice mage."

"Isn't the government supposed to take care of people like that?"

"We're here on debt collection duty only," said the mage. "Loan troubles. School of magecraft, two years and three out of twenty-four payments. The grand total of the debts we purchased is two hundred seventy-three thousand samar."

"Ah." Henley paused. They had reached the front doors. "So you're just here for the money; you don't really care about the thief and brigand parts?"

"We do," the mage replied, and stepped outside. "It makes our job more dangerous. It also gives us the possibility of reward monies from the King." A brutish fellow at the gate waved at the mage, who turned and went back inside.

Henley stared nervously at the men by the gate. "Who are they?"

"Bouncers. Where's the lavatory?"

"Second door on the left, there. I assume you plan to pay for any damage to the Manor."

"We'll add it to Ellings' tab." The mage paused in mid-stride, scanning the hallway. He sniffed experimentally. "Do you employ any magic-users, other than Ellings?"

"Not that I'm aware of," said Henley. "I mean, I know a couple little things, but I've never been very good at—"

"Shh. I smell...trickery."

Jane stood in the doorway, silent and still, waiting. The mage had detected her spell, as she had assumed he would, but it seemed to be holding up despite his probing. *No sudden moves*,

she reminded herself, fully aware of her own inexperience. Without the time to prepare for the spell properly, she wasn't sure how long she would be able to maintain it. As the mage's stare passed across—and through—her, she resisted the urge to shiver. His eyes moved on, calmly and thoroughly examining every inch of his surroundings.

The moment his gaze was no longer centered on her, Jane took a slow step forward, leaving the doorway and its false security behind. She took another step, this time to the right, and crouched in front of the pillar there. The mage had not yet perceived her presence.

"I take it this means you don't have our money, Ellings," said the mage, reaching into the air with his hands and the magical extensions thereof. "But that we had already guessed. Our time here is being billed to your account, by the way. The longer it takes for us to catch you, the more you'll have to pay. At this point we're willing to have you placed in a work program. But if you make us catch you, you can be an example, and we'll settle for the reward money."

Tempting. But in the debt collection business, and in cases like hers in particular, 'work program' meant 'thirty to forty years in a labor camp.' Jane declined by her continued silence and took another crouch-step away from the mage, working her way around the pillar.

"Your wardings are excellent, Mister Henley," said the mage, his lips barely moving as he stood there, hands outspread and head bowed in concentration. "She is still on the premises. That much I can tell...unfortunately, her precise location remains something of a mystery. Wickzin?"

"And a few others," Master Henley replied, nodding. He appeared mildly perturbed. "I hate eavesdroppers."

"Invisibility." The mage opened his eyes. "Not completely rusty, then. Do you think she would come out if you ordered her to?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I'm not sure if we've ever spoken. She sounds like a rather headstrong young lady."

Thank you, Jane mouthed. Master Henley wasn't the doddering old man she'd taken him to be. Why he was protecting her, she hadn't quite figured out. By doing so, he endangered himself, the staff, his house and his businesses. He stood to gain approximately nothing, aside from his cook's eternal gratitude. She took another step, flattening herself against the wall. The pillar was now between her and the mage.

"Please try," the mage prodded.

"Very well," said Master Henley. He cleared his throat, and raising his voice slightly, addressed the hall. "Please show yourself, Miss Ellings. These men would like to take..." He glanced at the mage. "Wait...you're not going to *hurt* her, are you?"

"I suppose I should go," said Curtis, sensing that he was perilously close to overstaying his welcome. He'd managed to procure a quick lunch, using his scorched sleeve—never mind that the skin was no more than sunburned—to full effect. He'd received a great deal of sympathy and fussing from one of the maids, and a roughly equivalent measure of eye-rolling from the other. The fussing was beginning to wear thin, but the lunch had been excellent.

"Mm," the gardener agreed.

"I don't suppose you know what's going on with...Miss Ellings, is it?"

"Getting what's coming to her, I don't doubt," said the gardener. "I seen *them* prowling for a week now. Watching. I'll be staying here until they're gone. Ever seen magic cross, Mister Curtis?" The gardener had gone slightly bug-eyed, and was looking at Curtis in a way he wasn't

at all sure he liked.

"Er, no. Crossly performed, yes—"

"Might nip off to the gardens, actually. Whole house could go any time...saw buildings go that way in the war...WHAM!" He slammed a fist on the tabletop. Curtis and the maids jumped. "Stores, homes, sometimes whole cities...the mages were insane." The gardener stared past Curtis into nothingness. "*I was there*," he whispered. "When it ended, I was *there*. Every curse a death sentence, or worse. It was worse when they hit each other...stayed in my hole...two of my men with me. Didn't move 'till the Duel ended. *Couldn't* move." Tears were running down the man's face. His fists trembled on the tabletop. "The screaming, though...that was worse than anything."

"I—"

"Have you ever seen a man turned inside-out, Mister Curtis?"

Jane could feel her invisibility flickering, and released it completely instead of wasting further effort maintaining what had become a completely useless disguise. Free from the need to concentrate on hiding herself, she let her senses drift to the study, examining the ghostly shapes within. She centered on Master Henley's desk chair, clearing her mind of all else. It was all coming back to her now, as she exercised the proper mental muscles. The chair was only a dim outline, but she could feel the smooth, polished wood in her hands.

She twisted suddenly with her hands and upper body, moving in a short, tight arc, and released the chair. The satisfying crash and crystalline tinkling of shattered glass masked her gasp. Footsteps pounded into the study. There they stopped, just inside the door. Jane peered around the pillar, and seeing that both the mage and Master Henley had entered the study, rushed down the hallway, keeping to the right side in hopes that the men outside would not see her.

"My window!" Master Henley cried. "I just had them cleaned, too!"

As Jane crossed the hallway to reach the kitchen door, it swung open and caught her solidly on the shoulder. Knocked to the floor, she narrowly avoided being trampled by Mister Curtis, who was backing out of the kitchen. He turned and stared at her for a moment, his stammering apology cut off in mid-syllable.

"She's in the hall, Trowbridge! The hall!" It took Jane a second to realize that Curtis was not the speaker. It took another moment for her to realize that he was dragging her into the kitchen by one arm. The door ripped from its hinges and spun through the air, struck by a hastily-aimed spell. It disappeared from sight in an instant, but it could be heard clattering further down the hall, chipping marble and—*crunch*—taking out Master Henley's grandmother's clock outside the lounge.

"You all right?" Curtis asked, helping her to her feet.

"Don't be dragging us into this, miss," said the gardener, alarmed at the intrusion into his perceived 'safe zone.' "Surrender while you have some honor left to speak of."

"Far too late for that," Jane replied. Without another word, she rushed through the kitchen and into the servants' quarters beyond. A few seconds later she was on the back stairs, headed for the second floor. Behind her, she heard boots storming across the stonework of the kitchen. Someone was shouting, but she couldn't make out the words. It was probably something asinine like 'don't let her get away!' or 'get her, you fools!'

"Which way?" the mage demanded, almost hissing. His fingertips were sparking, but he seemed completely unaware of this. One of the maids pointed toward the servants' quarters with a trembling hand. Curtis stood aside as the man continued on, having reconsidered his own temptation to trip the mage.

A second mage appeared in the doorway a moment later, panting heavily. He was nearly a foot taller than his companion, and was carrying enough extra pounds for the both of them. He glanced at Curtis, who nodded in the direction the first mage had gone. The second rushed from the room, shouting 'Don't let her get away, Trowbridge!'

"What's through there?" Curtis asked, when they had gone.

"Bugger off," said the gardener. "Caused enough trouble, haven't you?"

"It was just a question," said Curtis, visibly offended. "I wasn't going to go after them." He hesitated. "I suppose I should leave, though. I'm already twenty minutes late for work..."

The gardener grunted.

"The clock!" Master Henley bellowed from the hall. "You filthy vandals! I'm going to file a complaint with the city, you see if I don't!" He backtracked to the kitchens and glared quite equally at everyone inside. "What are you girls doing, hmm? Bloody mages are tearing this place to pieces. Someone find a broom; I want the..." He choked back a sob. "The clock...cleaned up." He stormed after the mages, no longer trusting himself to speak.

The maids stared at each other for a few seconds, silent. It was quite clear they thought Master Henley had lost his mind. Their wish to remain employed won out, however, and though they hesitated with every step, they entered the battlefield armed only with a broom, a mop, a potato sack and a leaky wooden bucket filled with cold water.

Curtis slipped out behind them and headed for the door.

Henley, distraught and fuming, left the maids to their business and followed the mages who'd invaded his home. He *would* file a complaint, when this was over. Enough was enough. He had not given them permission to enter the Manor, nor to destroy his front doors, and he couldn't imagine what they thought gave them the right to destroy his grandmother's priceless clock. Miss Ellings a brigand, indeed! All she had done so far was broken the window—expensive, yes, but replaceable.

He snapped his fingers as he ascended the stairs, and the torches lit in a long spiral. They were going *out*, these debt-collectors. They could lurk as they saw fit, but they wouldn't set foot in his household again without express permission.

He reached the top of the stairs and paused uncertainly, peering into the gloom. He'd never been to this hallway before, though of course he knew it existed. It was a dark, dank, narrow little thing. He thought he could see a figure down near the other end, but it was impossible to be certain.

"You there," he called out. "I'd like to have a word with you, Throwbrick!" Hearing no reply, he stepped into the hallway proper and continued. "This is entirely unacceptable!" He snapped his fingers again, but no lights came on this time. He tried again, with similar success. "Drat."

Jane forced herself to relax, taking slow, easy breaths. A person at rest caused far less

disturbance in the magical planes, and though her physical hiding place was excellent, she wanted to make sure she was well-hidden in the ethereal realm as well. Her teachers, always frustrated with her poor performance at school, would have been proud; within a minute her heart had slowed to a pace just a few beats per minute from death, and to all appearances she had ceased to breathe entirely.

Her eyes opened and closed lazily, controlled by a small, dim part of her mind still assigned to watching and waiting for the proper time to wake. Faint blue light cast a line across her face. It crept across her skin for a few inches before the source's angle became too steep to enter through the crack in her hiding place. Outside, the light illuminated broad swaths of dust-laden air and a dust-covered pile of amorphous shape. There were similar piles in the surrounding area, some joined at the base, others coaxed into something vaguely resembling order, creating winding paths throughout. Jane had hidden under one such pile, toppling what was once a hedge-like structure of boxes, furniture and assorted junk to create a cave for herself.

This cave had no entrance, but it did have a window. Jane had mixed feelings about this, but had not had sufficient time to remodel her new home-away-from-home.

Outside, a pair of boots roamed, stalking the neighborhood.

"Nobody goes in," one of the debt-collectors' bruisers pronounced, his voice rumbling ominously. Curtis froze, his mind belatedly registering that the man had said 'in', and that he was speaking to a silver-haired woman in the street. The other bruiser was watching Curtis, eyebrows raised, eyes darting from house to man to house, over and over.

"I need to..." Curtis began.

"Nobody goes out," the bruiser replied, flexing muscles in arms that were larger than Curtis' legs.

"What's going on here, young man?" the woman demanded, glaring hawkishly at Curtis. "Who are you? Who are these oafs?" She was carrying a pair of heavily-laden grocery bags, and she punctuated each sentence with a thrusting swing of both arms.

"Ah," said Curtis. "They're, well...we haven't been introduced, you see, but they're with the debt-collectors."

"Debt-collectors," the woman replied, in much the same way Curtis had once heard his father say the word 'King.' And then the woman spat, as if her opinion of debt-collectors had not already been quite clear.

"I have nothing to do with it, I assure you!" Curtis exclaimed, taking a step back. "I'm just trying to get to work."

"Hmph. Who in their right mind would suspect Master Henley of not paying his debts, hmm?"

"It's a...Miss Ellings, I believe."

"I see." An uncomfortable silence descended. The bruisers seemed content to stand by and glower. The silver-haired woman and Curtis stared at one another, separated by four feet of air and the invisible wall of the debt-collectors' instructions.

"This is silly," Curtis said at last. "You work here?"

"I'm Mrs. Bennell; I run the house," the woman replied proudly, and brandished the grocery bags in her hands. "Special dinner tonight, if these brutish morons will let..." She repositioned her glasses a little and peered at the guard who faced her. "Ha!" she continued, after a moment's inspection. "Genby, you great useless oaf! I thought I recognized that nose. So this is

what you're up to these days, is it? After all that work of mine trying to get your shriveled little brain to understand the concept of letters, you end up here, working for the mages."

"Nobody goes in," the guards replied in unison. The one facing Curtis smirked. The other's face had grown steadily redder from the moment Mrs. Bennell said his name, and now he had begun to sweat. He dared not smile, much less smirk.

"Could we, maybe...trade places?" Curtis suggested. "She works here, I don't. The head count stays the same, and we get on with our little lives. How about it?"

"Nobody goes out," they said.

Nobody goes in. Nobody goes out. Them's the orders. Them's made of letters, them are, and I obey 'em.

"Who's that?" Henley asked, and watched with vindictive pleasure as the tall figure across the room turned toward him, startled. It was the second mage. A ball of blue light pulsed in his left hand, held tightly by claw-like fingers. Henley was mildly embarrassed at the detritus its light revealed. Sixty years of junk had accumulated in this room, which had once been a ballroom and atrium. The skylights were boarded over and canvassed now; Henley wasn't sure how many had been broken before Mrs. Bennell declared the room 'unfit for decent folk' and had it shut up. The main entrances, two grand staircases on either side of the entry hall below, had been boarded over and painted to match the other walls.

A pity, really. The stargazing platform on the roof was accessible only from this room, and Henley could recall many a fond evening spent up there, lying on his back, doing absolutely nothing. Perhaps it was time to have the room cleared.

"Stay out, Henley," said the tall man. His voice was slightly less chilling than the first mage's. "I suspect she's in here..."

"Well, if you..." Henley stopped, then opened his mouth again, his face reddening. "See here! This is *my* house, and I did *not* invite you in, and you *have not* presented any official entry papers, and I want you *out* right now!" Shaking with righteous fury, he stomped on the floor.

"Shut your face before I shut it for you," the mage snarled, and returned to his search.

Henley seethed. "A pox on you, sir, and your kin as well!" He snapped thumb and index finger together on both hands, creating an angry clicking sound. The mage, who appeared to be seriously considering the judicious use of a paralysis hex, howled as his hair burst into flame.

"My head!" he cried, and set out running for the door. He made it about three feet before tripping over an unseen piece of debris. The blue light in his hand flickered madly, and then went out. He struggled on, crawling now, his path well-lit by the fire atop his head. At last he managed to right himself, and charged at Henley like a bull that has suddenly been given the gift of speech and decided to scream. "Help me! Put it out, put it out!"

"Oh, don't be such a baby," said Henley, as the mage clutched at him.

"My *head*," the man screamed, shaking Henley with both arms, "*is on fire!*"

"Yes, I see that. Does it hurt?"

"Of course it bloody well hurts! It..." The mage stared at Henley. Henley smiled back.

"Having a little trouble, Dillin?"

Henley turned to face the newcomer. The flaming mage peered over Henley's shoulder, looking quite bedraggled, in a dusty sort of way.

"Ah, there you are, Throwbrick," said Henley. "Diller here and I were having a conversation." He glanced at the tall mage, who was patting experimentally at his blazing head.

"Never mind the explanation; I don't think I want to know after all. Kindly put out my associate's head."

"Yes, well..." Henley chewed on his lip, contemplating.

"You don't know how?"

"No," said Henley. "I told you, I'm not very good at this." He chuckled nervously, his anger spent.

"I see." The mage made a series of intricate hand and finger-movements in the air, then clasped his hands tightly together, all the while staring at the fire on the tall mage's head. When nothing happened, he frowned and tried again. "Not very good, Henley? I've never seen this before."

"I was a bit angry at the time," Henley replied, as apologetically as he could. "It's just that I haven't seen any papers from you fellows, and I really don't think you ought to invite yourselves in."

"Get back to the front gate, Dillin," said the short mage, ignoring Henley. "You shouldn't have left your post. Watch for Ellings, and if I'm not out in fifteen minutes, call for a shock team."

"But what about—"

"Just ignore it. They'll be able to break it at the lab. Go." The tall mage went.

"I'm very sorry," said Henley. "I was just trying to pox him."

"No doubt he deserved it," the mage replied, paying less attention to Henley than he did to the room. "Seems an excellent place to hide. How many exits?"

Henley's face scrunched up in concentration, and he poked at the air once or twice with his right forefinger while chewing on the nail of its left-hand brother. "Three. This one, for the servants, the double doors—over that way, I think—for guests, and the stairs to the roof. I'm not sure how many are accessible...this one is, obviously."

"Obviously." The mage walked away from Henley, disappearing into the darkness within the span of a few seconds. "Please stay there," his now-disembodied voice continued, "while I conduct the search. If you see Miss Ellings, be sure to shout or something."

"That man's head is burning," Mrs. Bennell announced. Curtis turned and was mildly surprised to discover she was not making it up. The short mage's tall, portly companion strode toward the gate, head high and eyes avoiding contact. His hair had become a miniature bonfire.

"Trouble?" one of the bruisers asked, smirking.

"No, I'm *fine*," the mage replied, and stomped past, muttering something about 'that yammering fool.'

"It doesn't do at all to underestimate Master Henley," said a smiling Mrs. Bennell.

"Fellow looks all right to me," said Curtis, shrugging. "Not *real* fire like I had."

"Oh, Master Henley set you on fire as well?"

"No...one of the mages. Speaking of mages...maybe torch-head here can get these gentlemen to stand aside." Curtis paused. "Though he looks a bit miffed, doesn't he?"

Mrs. Bennell eyed the tall mage. "Don't see why he shouldn't help, miffed or not, twasn't our fault." She set her bags down and glared coldly at the Manor's new gatekeepers. "These'd better still be here when I get back."

The tall mage and Mrs. Bennell were engaged in quiet, angry conversation for nearly five minutes. Throughout, Curtis was torn between his desire to hear what they were saying and his relief at being one of the worst lip-readers in the known world. Unskilled though he was, he

suspected the mage of being less than gentlemanly.

At last Mrs. Bennell returned, and she did not look pleased. She snatched up the grocery bags and thrust them angrily at Curtis. "Here, make yourself useful, boy; take these to the kitchens. I'll not let good food spoil on account of these ruffians."

"Come now, Jane, the camps aren't so bad. They're certainly a great deal better than wherever the King will send you."

The King? In her dreamlike state, it took Jane a moment to remember what she had taken that would involve the King in this mess.

"He misses that pendant very much," the mage continued. A pile of boxes a few feet from Jane's hiding place lifted slowly into the air. Trowbridge peered underneath it for a moment before setting it down again. "Yes, I know you have it; I can feel it...eventually, it'll lead me right to you. Though I must admit, I *am* impressed that you've done so well at hiding this long, wardings or no."

He's afraid I've learned to use it. If only... Jane uttered a mental curse; Trowbridge was right; hiding was useless, while she had the pendant with her.

"You'd do well in the camps, Jane; they have few magic-users there. It would give you an edge. I realize it may seem unrewarding to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week for thirty years without pay, decent food or adequate sanitation facilities, but think of all the wonderful people you could meet. I hear you have some friends there now; some sort of plea bargain with the King."

So that's how they found me.

"Of course, their crimes were far less severe. I doubt the King will feel as...generous...if he gets his hands on you." The mage paused, listening to the ether, and smiled. "I'd say you have about twenty seconds of freedom left, Miss Ellings. I'm a fair man; I'll keep my promise; come out now, without a fight, and you can join your friends. I'd hate to see your master's lovely home torn apart because of us. What do you say?" He was almost standing on top of her now, his head turning slowly from side to side. He knew he was close- within a few yards.

Jane knew he was a great deal closer than that. The heel of his right boot had brushed against her shoulder. She also knew that if she was going to do anything but give herself up, now was the only opportunity she was going to get. Her heart's slow, steady beat jumped a hundredfold as adrenalin surged through her system. Blood rushed painfully through numb flesh, and she struck blindly upward with her legs, catching one of Trowbridge's ankles, knocking him off-balance and—more importantly—sending his spell into the south wall instead of her body. The house shook, sending dust billowing throughout the storage room.

"What's going on in there?" Master Henley shouted. "Trowbridge? Miss Ellings?"

Still bent double beneath her mountain of boxes and junk, fists clenched, Jane tensed her shoulders and flexed, releasing a hastily prepared concussion spell. To Trowbridge, who had just managed to recover his balance, it felt as if he had just been struck by a charging horse. The spell cleared an area twelve feet across, hurling the mage—and everything else in the area—upward and outward. Even the dust in the air had cleared, though it came pouring back instantly. Jane found herself standing, albeit shakily, and limped toward the ballroom's main doors, hardly able to see or think after using so much energy at once. One of her legs dragged stubbornly, still numb.

As Trowbridge stirred far behind her, Jane pushed through the doors and onto the landing. With the mage's light now gone, she couldn't see a thing, and three more steps brought her to the stairs, which she descended in the quickest manner possible: the trip and tumble.

Mr. Curtis, like every other person on the first floor of the manor, had stopped moving and stared apprehensively at the ceiling when Trowbridge's spell rocked the house on its foundation. When the second spell hit, Curtis decided that Mrs. Bennell would have to be satisfied with him leaving her groceries on the floor of the entry hall.

He didn't have a chance to find out what Mrs. Bennell thought of this, however, because at that moment the wall beside him made a horrible cracking noise and leapt out at him. It struck him nearly full-on as he turned toward it, and had he not still been carrying two bags of vegetables, flour and sundry items, his face would soon have required reconstructive work. As things were, he found himself sprawled on his back, curling his head and arms in front of him for protection. He groaned.

Then, to his surprise, the wall groaned back. He pushed at it, and after a bit of straining, managed to pull himself out, leaving the bags behind. He could only stare at the bloody, battered figure on the other side of the wall- Jane Ellings, Mr. Henley's 'butler' and cook. She looked half-dead, hardly conscious, yet still trying to stand, or kneel. She was covered head to toe in dust. Finally spotting him, Jane grinned past bloody teeth, and managed to make it up onto her knees. "Just repaying the favor, Mister Curtis." She stiffened and reached up to her neck, tracing the band there and following it across her back, where it closed tightly around something and brought it to her front again. "Still here," she whispered.

"Halt! Stay where you are!" Both Jane and Curtis turned to look for the voice, startled. Dillin and his entire two hundred-plus pound bulk were rushing across the street outside. He brusquely pushed Mrs. Bennell aside as he swept through the gate. "Trowbridge!"

Jane made a noise halfway between a groan and a growl. Pointing one finger in the general direction of the manor's doorway, she released a feeble, but impressive-looking spark of crackling red light. Dillin jumped aside with astonishing agility, cursing, and took cover behind a pillar just outside.

"Here," said Curtis, grabbing her arm. He pulled her to her feet. "Are you all right?"

She shook him off. "Don't help thieves. It's not worth it."

"Out of the way!" Dillin yelled, trying to get a clear shot at Jane.

"Better run," said Curtis.

"I said don't help me."

"I'm not. I've got a bone to pick with these guys. Now run." Curtis turned away and stumbled toward the doorway, doing his best to look dazed. "You, wizard there..."

"I said, get out of the way!" Seeing Jane limping for the kitchen, Dillin left his hiding spot and tried to line up a shot. Curtis, however, was—seemingly at random—blocking every move he made.

"...tried to kill me," Curtis mumbled. "You gonna do nothing about it?"

"I'll...if you'll just...go...move..." the mage was turning an unpleasant shade of purple, and finally he just reached out and brushed Curtis aside with an invisible hand, pressing him against the wall. "There..." he hissed, reaching for Jane's retreating figure.

"Dillin!" Trowbridge called out, reaching the bottom of the stairs—and stepping right in front of his associate. "Where is she?" Dillin howled, pointing helplessly at the end of the hall.

"The kitchen, you idiot! I had her!" The mages stared at each other for a moment, fury blazing in both sets of eyes, and then as one they turned and gave chase once again.

Curtis slumped to the floor, rubbing at his bruised limbs. He could hear the mages stomping through the kitchen, shouting at the maids, then continuing on through the side door to the back lawn. He'd done all he could; Jane's escape or capture was in her own hands now. He hoped she made it; he didn't know her, and he didn't know why he'd helped her, other than gut instinct and more than a little spite, but nevertheless, he hoped she'd eluded these high-and-mighty mages.

Quiet returned to hall and house. The remains of the clock had been placed in a tidy pile, but the rest of the destruction—including the latest batch—was beyond what two maids accustomed to dusting and cooking could handle. The chandeliers had all fallen and shattered. Most of the paintings had fallen from the walls, and the walls themselves had developed cracks in places. Crumbled mortar and bits of wood and glass littered the floor.

Distantly, Curtis heard Mrs. Bennell lamenting her groceries, and as he glanced back at the bags, he spotted something discarded on the floor where he and Jane had stood. He crawled over and picked it up, very carefully, between thumb and forefinger. It was a strip of leather, perhaps twenty inches long, with a knot near the middle. The ends had been joined at one time, but more recently torn apart. Curtis recognized it as the same one Jane had been wearing before he helped her to her feet. If the band was here, where was...whatever had been on it?

He searched the floor quickly, looking for something metallic, or jeweled, or at all shiny. Nothing. She had broken the band intentionally, he was sure; where would she have put...

Ah. Yes. He stood, carefully, forcing back tears at the pain in his legs, and placed the band in his pocket. His fingers brushed against something glassy and warm. A second later it lay in his palm, glittering. The King's raven pendant, ostensibly a trinket given to him during the War, but rumored to be something more: his path to the throne. He'd heard tales, both wild and scornful, of the powers—or worthlessness—of this piece of crystal since he was a child. Personally, he had always believed it to be little more than a piece of glass.

Now, he wondered why Jane Ellings had not *kept* it after stealing it, if it had any real value. Why had she left it here, with him? And why wasn't he already looking for someone to give it back to, before he got caught with it and sent to prison for the rest of his life?

The mages were coming back. Without Jane, if their grumbling was any indication. Curtis slipped the pendant back into his pocket. If they'd captured her, perhaps he would have surrendered it. Now...he wasn't sure. Something told him she'd be back for it.

"Look at this," said Dillin, pointing at something on the ceiling. "We've started leaks everywhere. Wickzin will never work with us again if Henley tells him we did this to his wardings. Not to mention the cost of having them set up again."

"And I certainly *will* tell him," Henley announced, entering the hall. "Every. Single. Detail. Just *look* at this! Where is that dratted girl? I want all of you out of my house, and I never want to see any of you again."

"She escaped," Trowbridge replied, coldly. "She went over the back wall, knocked out one of my men and vanished. I warned you she was dangerous."

"You destroyed half of my house, my *home*, and accomplished absolutely *nothing*? Wickzin won't be the only one to hear of this." Henley, who had almost reached apoplexy, suddenly broke down sobbing.

It was, in Curtis' view, a masterful performance.

Trowbridge dropped a business card for DT&A's Damages Division on Henley's doorstep. Perhaps that would mollify the man a little. Right now, Trowbridge didn't really care. He was very, very angry; this was supposed to be a five-minute collection; they had spent nearly forty-five minutes at Henley's house *and* failed to acquire their target. They were going to be late for their next appointment.

"Come," he said, and strode through the gates. "We're done here." The guards shrugged and fell in behind the mages. Mrs. Bennell gave the four of them The Look, which was enough to make even Trowbridge feel faintly cold, though he could not see her. He smiled.

"What about Ellings?" Dillin lowered his voice to a whisper. "*The pendant. What about the pendant?*"

"It's gone. She's found a way to hide it, or keep it from channeling her energy."

"With her training? Impossible."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. It doesn't matter; we're done." Trowbridge sighed. "We'll start sending out probes again; they'll pick up her trail eventually. They always do."

The End

Steven Richards is a freelance web developer/progammer, part-time writer and cg hobbyist. When not staring at his computer screen, he can usually be found staring at other people's computer screens, or attending classes at Western Oregon University in Monmouth. Steven's website, a culmination of the aforementioned activities, resides at http://www.aranai.com.

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Eleven months earlier

The streets of York shone under the chilly English summer sun. Half-an-hour earlier a sleet shower had washed the cobbled streets clean. Sunlight reflected from the little puddles and rivulets that were slowly draining toward the River Ouse. After two years in New Mecca, Jack Drake was quietly pleased at how tidy England still was. He was old enough to remember the piles of litter and the human debris that cluttered the streets before the New Reformation.

Stoneygate was lined with well-preserved buildings, many having original Georgian or Victorian frontages. An elderly couple passed on the other side of the street. They hardly seemed to notice Jack, which gave him some quiet satisfaction. His nondescript nature was cultivated and had served him well over the years. When people tried to describe him, they said he was medium height, medium build and somewhere in early middle age. All of which were true but rarely helpful to anyone who had taken an interest in him. Unconsciously, he ran his fingers through his tightly cropped hair. He liked his hair short. If he allowed it to grow, it soon offended his sense of order. He liked order. He liked the way kids in the Church towns were polite to their elders. He liked the way the sunlight caught in the polished bull's-eye windows of the little shops that dotted York's ancient winding streets; so much more aesthetically pleasing than the remorseless infodump infecting secular towns.

* * *

Jack walked along the echoing, stone-flagged corridor. On the walls, noticeboards announced end-of-term parties, upcoming milk rounds by the Presbyterians and Episcopalians, the career benefits of service overseas with VSO . He watched, fascinated, as their edges uncurled and flattened, seemingly pressed by an invisible iron. Colors, long bleached by sunlight, grew rich and vibrant. Tarnished drawing pins shone bronze bright, and then flowed like golden mercury.

Reality splintered—again, and again, and again, and—he was lost in an infinity of mirrors. Infinite variations of his tessellated existence. From the Big Bang to the heat death of every possible universe, Jack was ubiquitous. He sipped lukewarm coffee with ten thousand Juliet Frames, or died as he was born, or led interstellar empires, or wondered why the church didn't get more involved in politics, or left his cheating wife, or lay embarrassed beside his first lover, or held on fiercely to his wife, or . . .

He was alone, drowned in infinite versions of himself.

Dislocation . . .

* * *

It was starting to rain as Jack climbed the steps to the Chapter House. There had been a church of some sort on this site for fifteen hundred years, and York Minster had stood for the best part of a thousand years. In religious terms, it was always less than a cathedral, but more than a church. Its influence had, along with the mother church, been in decline for half a millennium. Until thirty years ago when the world changed.

The Chapter House's duty sergeant belonged to the Archbishop's own Green Howard regiment and had an impressive range of campaign ribbons pinned on his uniform. He gestured for Jack to step between the scanner pillars, and then carefully checked the threat monitor as

the circle of light descended Jack's body. The light was a psychological ploy, but the magnetic resonance scan it accompanied was highly efficient and could detect everything from a sharpened pencil to a microdot bomb.

"You can pass," the sergeant said.

Jack stepped out of the scanner and a tonsured monk approached him.

"Mr. Drake?" he asked. Jack nodded and the monk gestured toward a bench. "Please take a seat, Bishop General Flannagan will see you shortly."

"Bishop Flannagan? I was to see Archdeacon Harris."

"Please take a seat, the Bishop will see you shortly."

Too old a soldier to fret about changed orders, Jack sat down on a wooden bench. It was black with age, and the bottoms of centuries of penitents had worn smooth, shallow hollows. He took a newspaper out of his pocket and pressed his thumb against its content pane. The blank white sheet cycled through a range of pastel shades, as it created a personalised edition based on his—entirely fictitious—public profile.

"Not again," he said, as muted colours turned gaudy and the sheet formatted to a tabloid layout.

"BOSS BISH PREGGERS!! AGAIN!!!" the main headline screamed in big, bright red letters. The theme continued down the page "WIN A MILLION—NAME THE LUCKY GUY!"

Jack doubted whether anyone would scoop up that particular prize. Archbishop Susan was famously secretive about her private life, and no one had worked out who the father, or fathers, of her first two children were. Of course, there were plenty of theories—the Prince of Wales and the England cricket captain were the public favorites. Even she couldn't stop people speculating. Impatiently, he accessed the sheets' menu and called the broadsheet edition. Soberly fonted text appeared against a soft white background. He scanned the headlines: more trouble was expected between the Latter Day Saints and Islam. It was the usual problem: Islam objecting to the Mormons' retrospective conversion of millions of their dead. Accompanying the report were columns of gloomy analysis. In Jack's opinion the pessimism was absurd; the Mormons were officially pacifist, and he knew only too well that the Muslims were cowering in their enclaves in the Islamic Republic of Franco-Spain, still traumatized by the Final Revenge of 2045.

He turned to the sports section, where there was even worse news: the England cricket team's game with Pakistan was heading for a close finish. He tapped the update icon. England was 125 for five, chasing 256 for the win. Before he had finished reading the details, another wicket had fallen.

He looked up as a shadow fell across his paper. The monk was back.

"If would like to follow me, Bishop General Flannagan will see you now."

The Bishop's Office was on the top floor of the Chapter House. They climbed up a narrow, tightly wound stone spiral staircase that led onto a circular landing. The two guards flanking the high wooden doors opposite the stairway snapped to attention. After a moment, the doors swung soundlessly open. The monk escorted Jack in, pointed to a chair, then left.

Bishop Flannagan was a short, thin man in his mid fifties. He wore a conventional but well-cut suit. He sat behind a not-very imposing desk, reading a small datapad. While Jack waited to be acknowledged, he looked around the room. It was octagonal and austere, with pale green wallpaper bearing the crossed keys of Saint Peter. The only decorations were a collection of framed old newspaper front pages, all from that momentous month in 2031 when the great faiths had explained to a stunned world just how much of it they owned.

The lack of ostentation didn't surprise Jack. George Flannagan had a reputation

for unswerving commitment to the philosophy of New Reformation. Way back in the late thirties, when the Church lost patience and began to insist that the millions who worked in its businesses—and their families, and later their communities—had to toe the line, he had been at the forefront of negotiations. 'Soapy flannel', the media called him in their disgust, as company after company, community after community, acceded to Church law. The truth was, of course, that people really did prefer safe streets, for their kids not to be turned into junkies, and for an honest day's work to mean an honest day's pay.

"John Terrance Drake. Born 2020," the Bishop said eventually. "Joined the national Police Force in 2042. Reached the rank of Detective Inspector. Discharged without pension rights for reasons never made public in 2056. At which point you came to our attention." Drake nodded but Flannagan had still not looked up. "You freelanced for the Church a number of times; the Welsh rebellion, the Guilford riots, member of the security team for the summit with the Vatican and the Pan Buddhists in 2060. A fairly impressive record. Then there were the last two years . . ."

"That's over now . . . your influence I take it?" Jack said. He watched Flannagan carefully. The Bishop might have nodded, but he couldn't be sure.

Flannagan pushed a green folder towards Jack. "Read this. Let me know what you think."

Jack opened the folder. Surprisingly it contained a real paper document. After five minutes, he turned to the front of the report and skimmed through it again. He placed it back on the desk.

"Well?" the Bishop asked.

"It's a fairy story."

"I would tend to agree; except for the fact that there are two versions of Doctor Frame. And one of them is dead."

"Twins? Clones?"

"Both of them have only one head, and the normal number of limbs, so we can probably rule out cloning," the Bishop said, dryly. "There's no record of a twin and, well, they are effectively identical. Their weight, height, body fat, and a range of other measurements suggest that they are duplicates, not siblings. Twins start to diverge the moment they are born. By the time they're thirty-five years old, they differ in numerous measurable ways. The only difference in these two is that only one is getting older."

"Then it's a hoax. Someone's winding you up, trying to discredit the church. Where's the intel coming from?"

"NPF and Britgov Internal Security."

"Well, there you go. BIS wouldn't recognise the truth if it bit them on the ankle, and the police force is riddled with Catholics."

"Now, now, Mr. Drake, the days of strained relationships between the Church of England and the Vatican are over. We have to put our recent differences of opinion behind us."

Jack flexed his right knee, feeling the dull ache left by one of Flannagan's 'differences of opinion'.

"Yeah, we all sing from the same hymn sheet nowadays."

Flannagan smiled his soapiest smile. "Very droll. What do you know about quantum computers?"

The change of topic took Jack by surprise. "There was a documentary on Omninet. They work very fast. Some jiggerypokery with atoms."

"Your grasp of science is impressive. Actually, they work, it seems, because they can exist in many different states—some say different universes—at the same time. So a problem can

be analyzed in many different ways simultaneously. The idea originated at the end of the last century, but then was forgotten about when the universities abandoned science during the first part of this century"

"Then along came the New Reformation."

"Indeed. The Church bought out all the major endowment funds, closed all the media studies, tourism and other junk programmes and started putting money back into basic research."

Jack didn't try to disguise his surprise. "The church funded research into quantum-whatsits?"

"The quantum computer work was considered important, if very speculative. We developed partnerships with other funding bodies. But that is somewhat of a digression. Your job is to interrogate the surviving Doctor Juliet Frame."

Jack flipped through the dossier again. "She was sacked from the project six months ago. Why not grill the current team members?"

"They are not your concern. There is a train for London in thirty minutes. Be on it."

"You're forgetting; I'm on long-term leave. I've done my bit and all that."

Flannagan smiled thinly, and nodded towards the door. "Archdeacon Turvey will complete your briefing and will see to reactivating your implants."

Jack turned around as the door behind him opened. A large man dressed in an Archdeacon's uniform entered. The chunky, dark gold rings on his fingers looked oddly like knuckle-dusters.

"Come this way, Mr. Drake," he ordered.

* * *

Somehow, Jack found equilibrium high above the maelstrom of multiverses entwining him. Something was watching him. It might have been God. It might have been a vast constellation of carefully balanced spinning black holes.

It might have been a woman.

Whatever it was, it left him somewhere . . .

. . . somewhere featureless; without color, depth or edge. It reminded Jack of an essay set by a sadistic English teacher: write a thousand words describing the view from the 'inside of a table tennis ball'. He managed ten words, which earned him a week in detention.

He couldn't feel anything under his feet, but had no sense of falling. Gradually, he became aware of something pushing gently at him. It was insistent like the wind but didn't move his clothes, nor could he feel its breath against his face. It was, in a way, comforting; if nothing else, it gave him a sense of direction. He took a few steps. Walking with the non-wind at his back felt natural, as though it was the way of things in this place.

His natural perversity welling up, Jack turned around to face the non-wind . . . and found it at his back again. Whichever way he faced, the non-wind was always behind. Smiling grimly, he picked a random non-direction and started walking.

* * *

"We should have retired the poor man to a quiet monastery somewhere," Archbishop Susan Hodges said. "Heaven knows he has suffered enough. The things they did to him."

She rested her hands on her belly. There was maybe a slight swelling but her pregnancy didn't really show yet. Bishop General Flannagan paced uneasily around the roof garden. York was proverbially the 'safest city' in the western hemisphere, but its multiple layers of security, reaching from below ground level to low-Earth orbit, were invisible, their vigilance evident only in the low rumble of comm chatter in his occipital pickup. George Flannagan liked walls and doors. Preferably armoured ones.

"We had no choice," he said.

The Archbishop sighed and lowered her head. "What if we are wrong?"

Shocked by his Archbishop's uncharacteristic irresolution, Flannagan replied with as much confidence he could muster. "The DNA evidence is incontrovertible, Jack Drake killed Doctor Frame."

"I wonder if we will ever know why?"

"Or, more to the point, how—" Flannagan touched his ear briefly. "The Pan-Buddhist ambassador is here, Eminence. You should return to your office to prepare."

"We can linger a while, George. He is a patient man."

* * *

"We are just approaching Peterborough," the train's tannoy announced in a vaguely sepulchral female voice. "Customers will be pleased to know that we are one minute early."

"Thanks, Ms. Mussolini," Jack muttered.

He accessed his datapad and called up Juliet Frame's public biography. Her mugshot was typical of its breed: badly lit and decidedly unflattering. She had just turned thirty-five, and was single with no children. He tapped the Amplify icon. After a couple of seconds, his pad connected to the Church's private database, which held, among other things, a list of her 'significant others'. The list went back to her student days, and was relatively short. Only half a dozen lovers were listed, all men, and none of them worked in science. She had been unattached for the last two years.

He accessed her academic record. She was bright, if nobody's idea of a prodigy. Reading between the lines, he decided that she had coasted through school and high school, and had only really started to work after she won a church bursary to Somerville College at Oxford. He checked her University discipline record. It was unblemished, with no black marks since she signed her Church Contract. Academically, she had done well, if not brilliantly, picking up a 2.1 in physics, then gone on to win a PhD for a thesis that one referee described as 'solid'. Despite her relatively modest academic achievements, she had proved adept at winning grants. At least until her sacking for unspecified 'gross misconduct'. Since then she had been unable to find a job, and had lived on her fast-dwindling savings.

He accessed several back-door portals on his datapad, but they were no help in finding the reason for her sacking. When he tried to sneak into the NPF's records, a scrubber virus was unloaded to his datapad. His own systems defeated the malicious little program easily enough, but he had to accept that he was on his own.

He slipped a nicotine tab under his tongue and tried to doze as the snow-covered fields raced by.

* * *

Jack might have been walking for a minute or a year. He wasn't tired, but he sensed that his physical condition wasn't a good measure of his predicament. Nothing had changed. He hadn't passed any landmarks, changes in what passed for terrain, or noticed any variation in the non-wind. On an impulse he glanced over his left shoulder.

A man stood on what Jack decided to call the horizon. He was facing Jack, but had turned his head to look behind. Doubly relieved at finding a measure of perspective and another human being, Jack turned around and started to walk towards the man . . . who turned around and walked away in the opposite direction.

* * *

Light snow fell from a battleship-gray sky as Jack left Kings Cross Station. The twittering of birdsong emanated from a pane wrapped around a lamppost. Extinct parrots circled the pane, advertising holidays in the Caribbean. Underneath, a flashing red sign warned that visa applications to the Greater United States were now taking forty-six months to process.

A group of young offenders busily polished the plinth of the Richard III statue that dominated the station entrance. Their supervisor, a young Salvation Army captain, leaned on a broom and sipped from a tin mug. The king stood straight-backed and defiant as though he knew, but didn't care, about the treachery awaiting him at Bosworth Field. Jack nodded to Good King Dick for luck and crossed the station concourse, weaving smoothly through the crowd.

He started down Euston Road. A Pan-Buddhist monk sat lotus-fashion just inside an alley, out of the snow, his saffron-coloured robe spread out in front of him. On it were a small porcelain Buddha and a charity collection license. Jack knelt down beside the monk and placed a ten-pound coin under the Buddha. A smartly dressed young woman walked past them and muttered something. After the Great Revelation left Buddhism as the only faith that was genuinely uninterested in worldly wealth, it attracted hundreds of thousands of converts in the Western world. In many cases they had no means of financial support. In what was supposed to be an interim measure, the Churches allowed them to seek charity on the streets. Decades later, the Buddhist street collectors were a familiar part of life in the big cities all over the world. Buddha's devotees seemed happy in their poverty.

This one was chubby and smiled beatifically. "The charitable man is loved by all; his friendship is prized highly; in death his heart is at rest and full of joy, for he does not suffer from repentance; he receives the opening flower of his reward and the fruit that ripens from it. The charitable man has found the path of liberation," he said in a broad Cornish accent.

"Absolutely," Jack muttered.

* * *

Jack wasn't sure how long it had taken him to figure out that he was following himself. When he realised this, he shouted angrily at himself and then stopped, feeling vaguely embarrassed. The non-wind still tugged enigmatically and, without another backward glace, he set off in another random non-direction.

* * *

Imperial College's physics building was wrapped up like a Christmas present. Yellow and

black tape festooned the main entrance, and the pavement was littered with uniformed police. A couple of them were busy ushering pedestrians away from the granite columned entrance. Strangely, the media was conspicuous by its absence. Murder was rare these days, and Jack had expected the scene of the crime to be hip-deep in newschasers, desperate to earn their thirty seconds of Omninet facetime.

Two officers stopped Jack as he approached the entrance. They were polite enough and didn't even point their oily-black, Heckler-Koch XM-17s automatics at him, but Jack's experienced eye was drawn to fingers hovering near triggers. He flashed his Church pass. The tension showed no signs of ebbing, but they stepped aside as he brushed past them.

Bad memories awoke while he walked down echoing corridors. The building had lots of little rooms and sudden turnings. It was a great place for an ambush. It reminded him of a certain madras near the Jardin des Tuileries.

Five minutes later he was inside the low-temperature, physics laboratory, doing his best to ignore the two officers who had followed him. A tapespray outline on the floor marked where the body of the late Dr. Juliet Frame had been found. Jack gave the outline a cursory glance; forensics was not his speciality.

The rest of the lab was pretty much what he had expected: workbenches covered in electronic equipment, much of it in pieces, paper textbooks and notebooks strewn randomly around. Incongruously, a copy of the Sporting Daily poked out from under a textbook on superconductors. He examined the racing paper. It was today's. Someone had highlighted the favourites in three afternoon races: Arctic Drummer and White Mercury at Redcar, and Old Synner at Newmarket. He tapped the update pane only to get a "no signal" error. He wasn't surprised; a high-end computer lab was almost certain to be shielded from Omninet's carrier. On an impulse, he surreptitiously shoved the paper into his back pocket and then turned his attention to the laboratory's main feature.

The room was dominated by a sixty-meter high, stainless steel cylinder that rose through gaps cut in three levels of floor grating. It was entwined with convoluted titanium tubing, and was covered in danger signs, including warnings about 'Cryogenic Liquids', 'Megawatt Lasers' and 'Extremely High-voltages'. Three large ceramic liquid nitrogen vats covered the wall to the right of the main equipment. He pressed his hand against the casing of the machine that protected it and him. It vibrated slightly and, up close, he could hear a faint humming noise.

"Whether it works or not, it must have cost a fortune," he said to himself.

* * *

Juliet's hair twisted in the non-wind. She stood quiet, apparently waiting for Jack to say something. For a time he couldn't put his thoughts into words. He wondered if he had forgotten how to speak.

"You seem at home here," he said eventually.

"What do you mean?" Juliet said.

He reached forward and touched a waving strand of her hair. "The wind affects you; I seem to be immune."

"It's not wind, Jack; it's gravity."

"Got it all figured out, have you?"

"It's the old joke, Jack. If you take an infinite number of copies of a physicist, and give her infinite time to work on a problem . . ."

"They might see God?"

"Glimpse a shadow, maybe."

"What is this place? You're going to tell me it's a metaphor, aren't you?"

"You're not as dumb as you pretend to be, soldier. Yes, it's a metaphor. One operating on a rather large number of levels, it has to be said."

* * *

The interrogation room at Paddington Police Station was too comfortable in Jack's opinion. He had been in a few interrogation rooms in his day, on both sides of the table. They tended to the utilitarian, not to say deliberately intimidating. Here the chairs were almost cozy, the illumination wasn't too bright, and the temperature was moderate. There was even a bowl of blue azaleas on the table that separated him from Dr. Juliet Frame. The flowers had seen better days, but they added a homely touch he found oddly disconcerting.

Dr. Frame was better looking than her mugshot had suggested. Bleached hair framed her face. He guessed she was one of those women who were better looking in their late thirties than they had been in their early twenties. She wore a bright orange prison jumpsuit, and her face looked scrubbed clean.

"I'm Jack Drake."

She made a sound somewhere between a choke and a giggle. "You haven't got any nicotine tabs, have you?"

"Never use 'em."

She shrugged. "I want a lawyer. I haven't done anything."

"I want the Gulf Stream back and a puppy for Christmas. You can't always get what you want. Especially when you're dead."

"That's funny, I'm sitting here, heart beating, chatting to a Church stooge. What are you planning to do, charge me with my own murder? That would set a legal precedent or two."

"There's a body lying in Hammersmith morgue that looks a lot like you. Hell, as far as the pathologist can tell, it is you. You could be charged with murder. Or suicide."

"You are kidding, of course?"

Jack shrugged. "Why did you murder yourself?"

"What made you think I did?"

He picked up his datapad and accessed the case file. "At three minutes past seven this morning, you broke into the laboratory and encrypted the access systems. At ten to nine, building security forced the lab door, entered and found the body of Doctor Juliet Frame, who had been killed by a wound to the head, inflicted with a large spanner found lying beside the body. Two hours later you were arrested at home."

"Funny that, isn't it? The plods kicked my front door in. It was almost like they expected to find me. Which, when you think about it—"

"What did you expect?"

She drummed her fingers on the table. "The unexpected, ta-ra!"

"This is serious. Don't mess me about."

"I was being serious. Someone had to stop them. Strange things have been happening at the lab."

"Such as?"

Juliet shrugged and turned her attention to the azaleas. "They're pretty. Bet you'll have

them taken away."

Jack stood up. As he left, he dropped a pack of nicotine tabs on the table.

* * *

Having decided to leave Dr. Frame to stew for a while, Jack sat in a quiet corner of the Bishop's Mitre pub on Compton Street, mulling over the post-mortem report. The cause of death had been confirmed as a blow to the head from the spanner. The pathologist could not pin the time of death down to better than one hour either side of eight o'clock that morning. Since all the surveillance and recording systems had been turned off, that was as precise as things were going to get.

The spanner was clearly the murder instrument. Inevitably, it was covered with Dr. Frame's DNA and smaller amounts, mostly from fingerprints, donated by several other members of the team. Frustratingly, there were no details on these people, just a long string of code identifiers. He piggy-backed the codes onto a ferret program and sent it off into the murkier regions of the Church's databases. It returned, unsuccessful, in surprisingly quick time.

There was also an 'unidentified' DNA signal from a set of smudged prints underlying the blood but overlying the team's marks. The DNA was almost certainly the murderer's, but his ferret only found more dead ends.

He took a sip of his whiskey, rolling it round his tongue, savouring the peaty taste. He shifted in his seat a little uncomfortably, the almost forgotten sports paper digging into his backside. He smoothed the memopaper out on the little round table. It was crumpled, but made a game effort at contacting its data channel. Large swathes of it were blank, but he was able to call an update of the afternoon's results.

"Now there's a thing," he said quietly.

He put the sports paper in his jacket. The was a low sound from Netv in the far corner of the room. He glanced at the screen. The feed was running a report from BBC41's inexplicably popular, hang-gliding weather girl. She soared high above black clouds. Jack looked up as a shadow fell across the table

"There you are," Archdeacon Turvey said. He was wearing a tweed hunting suit that didn't exactly make him look inconspicuous.

"How'd you track me down?" Jack asked.

"Just looked in every pub. It wasn't too hard."

Jack looked at the Archdeacon's face. It was etched with lines, none of them of the 'laugh' variety. Jack had scanned his body a couple of times since reaching London, and hadn't detected any bugs. He reached into his jacket for his datapad, keyed a security icon and put the pad on the table. Turvey half-smiled as he sat down.

"Mine's a whiskey," Jack said.

"Don't be such a fool."

"Why, my dear Archdeacon," Jack said in a loud voice, "I do believe you have my welfare at heart."

Several customers rubber-necked from their bar stools, and the barman glowered from under his bushy eyebrows. He was a middle-aged Aussie with ingrown sullenness. Jack knew his type well. Australia had closed its borders to all migrants in 2050. To prove it wasn't being racist, it extended the ban to its own long-term expatriates. Thousands of young Aussies had been stranded around the world, most of them in the UK. Turvey glared at them, and they suddenly

decided that the Netv was much more interesting.

Turvey leaned forward and whispered. "We haven't been very impressed so far—"

"I always start slowly. Puts the suspect off guard. But you know that. Why are you hassling me about it?"

"Time is a factor here."

Jack checked his watch. It was nearly eleven o'clock. "First I've heard of it. I can go back have another go now if you want."

"She's asleep now. Don't let that stop you," Turvey said as he stood up. "Assuming you are up to it, of course."

Jack gave a mock salute. On his way out, Turvey spoke briefly to the barman. The Aussie smiled and winked at Jack and then held a shot glass upside down before hunkering down with his cronies at the bar. Jack ignored them and spent the next few minutes uploading software to his datapad. On his way out he thumbed a key. Ten minutes later the pub's electronics crashed.

* * *

"Gravity?" Jack said. "That sounds a bit—"

"Mundane?" Juliet said.

"Have you noticed how often we finish each other's sentences?"

"That's what happens when you open the box marked infinity. We're the old married couple, raised to the googolplex, and then some. But I was—"

"Going to tell me about gravity."

"Gravity's mundane and weak. Not long from now, you are going to pick up a spanner. It's quite heavy, but you'll easily lift it against the whole mass of the Earth—"

"I've been working out."

"Funny. It's no wonder I fell in love with you so often. I guess opposites really do attract. Of course, you killed me in a psychotic rage brought on by your little biochemical problem a few times."

"Only a few?"

"You don't want to know. Anyway, gravity. Weak old gravity. Except it's not so weak. On Planck scales—that's when things are very, very small—it's as strong as any other force. But even on classical scales, it's stronger than we can perceive. That's because it leaks, it slides sideways through time and space, spanning all the dimensions."

Jack waved at the nothing around them "All the dimensions? Including this here ping-pong ball one? I'm so impressed. You gonna tell me where we are?"

Juliet bit her lip. "Have you ever heard of Fred Flintstone?"

* * *

"You've been drinking. I can smell it from here," Dr. Frame said.

"I didn't wake you up, did I?" Jack asked.

"No. What time is it?"

Her jumpsuit was crinkled and sweaty and her hair needed a brush. She looked better than Jack felt. He had the beginnings of a headache and fatigue was seeping into his limbs. For a moment he wondered where the flowers had gone. Then he realised this was a different, slightly less comfortable room. He took the sports paper out of his jacket pocket and pushed it across the

table. Juliet raised her eyebrows a fraction. She spun the paper round and accessed an update, read the results and nodded.

"You're not as dumb as you look," she said.

"Someone got lucky on the gee-gees. I don't see what this has to do with you murdering . . . whoever she was."

Juliet looked surprised. She gestured at the paper. "But I thought—you must have talked to the others—the other members of the research team, I mean. How else would you know how significant this is?"

For a moment Jack weighed his options. He decided honesty would make a nice change. "I've not seen the other staff members. I'm guessing that NFP—"

"Oh God. They know what happened."

"Who? They?" Feeling stupid, Jack stopped himself.

"I have to get back to the laboratory," Juliet said intensely.

"That might be hard—"

"I have to turn the machine off."

"Why? It's just some sort of computer. Is it going to blow up, or try to take over the world?"

"It's not just a quantum computer. It's something else."

"Is this going to turn into a lecture?" Jack asked.

Juliet leaned forward. Jack edged closer.

"It's a time machine," she whispered.

* * *

"She's a nutter," Jack said, exasperated. "Or a bloody wind-up merchant."

Archdeacon Turvey smiled a thin smile and steepled his fingers. It was two in the morning, and it had taken an hour to track the Archdeacon down. The man looked a lot better than Jack, whose headache had pitched its tent across his forehead, and showed no signs of moving on.

"And your point is?" Turvey asked.

"A time machine?"

"It seems unlikely."

"Unlikely!" Jack spluttered.

"Perhaps you would like a sober-up pill—"

Jack slammed his fist hard on the table between them. The polystyrene coffee cups he had acquired during the wait jumped several centimeters, flinging dregs in all directions. Turvey inclined his head to one side and flicked at some drops that had landed on his sleeve.

"I know what the Muslims did to you, Jack. That nasty little retrovirus that rewrote your liver biochemistry. A clever way of getting around the Koranic prohibition on revenge killing. Really, you shouldn't drink at all—"

"I'm all right."

"If you say so. Back to business then. You are to continue your interrogation of Doctor Frame."

Jack tunelessly hummed a few bars of the Wizard of Oz theme.

"Wherever it leads."

* * *

"Fred what-stone?" Jack asked.

"Flintstones. Ancient TV cartoon. One of my team had a pirate holodisk of all hundred-and-sixty odd episodes—"

"Odd sounds about right—"

"Don't interrupt. Some of them were quite funny—"

"Why do I get the impression you're stalling for time?"

"Stalling for time? That's funny, Jack. Anyway, back to the Flintstones. These things were done cheap, so they used to save on backgrounds by having the scenery continuously scrolling. So when Fred, that's the man of the house in the cartoon, was running somewhere, he'd pass a rock, for example, and a few seconds later he'd pass the same rock again, and so on."

"Until the joke wore a bit thin?"

"Yeah, which wasn't very long to be honest."

"So you are saying we are stuck in Fred Flintstone land, and that's why I'm following myself." He looked over his shoulder. "And there I am, but there's no sign of you back there. Interesting."

"It is, isn't it?" Juliet said.

She snapped her fingers.

* * *

Juliet slumped, head resting on her arms. For a moment Jack thought about letting her rest. A handful of sober-up pills washed down by strong coffee had given him an artificial buzz, but had done nothing for the fatigue toxins flooding his body. After his repatriation, the doctors had prodded and poked him for weeks—he'd punched one for being too enthusiastic about the biochemical intricacies of his 'problem'—but hadn't come up with a solution. He was screwed on a permanent basis. They explained it to him in nauseating detail. His liver was different now. It had problems regenerating something called NAD, and when he drank he badly skewed something called 'the hepatic redox balance,' leading to 'serious metabolic derangements'. The details bored him. All he needed to know was that booze left him feeling like he had been kicked in the head by a horse.

It could have been worse. Ten years earlier, the Muslims would have killed him out of hand. He wouldn't have blamed them, either.

He sat down quietly, oddly reluctant to wake Juliet.

"Go away," she said.

"Tell me about time machines," he said.

She looked up and rested her chin on her folded arms. "Bosses got to you, soldier? Reminded you about following orders, did they?"

"Let's not make things harder than they need to be."

"Or what? You'll hit me? Bet you've hit a lot of women in your time."

"Only in the line of duty . . . and not that many."

"You're just a grunt—why am I even talking to you?"

"Beats me."

Juliet laughed and sat up. "God help us, you have no clue how the world works, do you?"

"I've been around."

"No you haven't. You don't even know how the world got to be the way it is."

"You mean the churches—"

"Yes, the churches! How the hell did these people take over the world? Oh, don't give me that guff about hidden investments and long-term visions. Catholicism was bankrupt after decades of fighting child abuse suits, the Anglicans had split into a hundred factions, the Sikhs and Hindus spent decades refining their mutual hatred, and Islam was traumatized by the Final Revenge—"

"Judaism survived—" Jack began.

"Only just, and they have millennia of experience at surviving the worst the rest of us have inflicted on them. They never wanted world domination. Just to be left alone. God knows they've got their wish—"

"What about the other faiths, like the Buddhists and the Church of America?"

"The Mormons always had more money than God herself, and as for the Buddhists, well, they're just happy to keep themselves to themselves. Good policy these days. Oh never mind, can we change the subject?"

"Sure. You were going to tell me about time machines," Jack said.

"Way to keep focus, soldier. Do you really want a lecture?"

"Why do you keep looking at the door?"

"Because I expect the grown-ups to arrive any time soon."

Jack thought she had a point. "I thought time travel was impossible. Something about paradoxes?"

"Good boy. Imagine you went back in time and killed your grandmother. But if you did, you would never be born and couldn't go back to engage in a bit of grannycide."

"Like I said, impossible—"

"Have you heard of the Bester effect?"

Jack accessed his datapad. "Yes. It's in the title of your PhD thesis—'The Bester Effect, a study in causality.'—who's Bester?"

Juliet pursed her lips and pressed a finger briefly to them. "Old science fiction writer. He's probably on the Church's banned list."

"The Church doesn't ban books."

Juliet laughed. "Of course it doesn't."

"And the Bester Effect is?"

"So you didn't actually read my thesis."

"I've been busy, and it looked like it had a lot of hard sums and difficult equations. Paraphrase please."

"Bester's idea was if you traveled back in time and made some drastic change, like killing granny, you would be shoved onto another timeline entirely. Also, the more you changed the timeline, the further from your own timeline you would end up. The corollary to the Bester Effect is that small changes to the timeline don't affect the main path of reality."

"Every school kid knows that," Jack deadpanned back.

"You're so droll. I could almost fancy you under different circumstances."

"If I'm following you, you are saying that you can make a time machine but you couldn't do anything with it that would . . . what did you call it, affect the main—"

"Path of reality."

"Like betting on horse races."

Juliet nodded.

"So you built a time machine."

"I built a quantum computer. Just like I was told to. It turned out to have some interesting properties."

"I remember reading that quantum computers work by interacting with parallel universes," Jack said carefully.

Juliet applauded silently. "That's the theory in a nutshell. Quantum computers foliate into their own clusters of quasi-parallel universes whose space-like hypersurfaces interact exclusively with each other. The standard model says that they can't communicate with other universes."

Jack let his mouth flap open a couple of times.

"Going too fast for you, pookie?" Juliet said. She glanced at the ceiling. "Don't worry, I'm sure your bosses have someone listening in who understands the science."

"So your quantum computer turned into a time-machine? How was that possible?"

A wave of nausea swept through Jack. Hand to mouth, gagging, he staggered to the door.

* * *

"Where are we?" Jack gasped, unable to grasp the voids erupting around him.

The eleven-fold wind tore relentlessly, pouring eternities through him—or him through eternities. He had no way of knowing, no point of reference. Somehow he understood that such concepts were redundant. This revelation gave him no comfort.

"Juliet, where are you?" he sobbed.

"I'm here. Don't worry. The worst part is nearly over."

"Nearly? Oh gr—"

* * *

"Feeling better?" Juliet asked, when Jack returned ten minutes later.

"Much," Jack lied.

He had been sick as the proverbial dog. Archdeacon Turvey hadn't been very sympathetic, nor had the multiple injections he had ordered made Jack feel any better. The shouting hadn't helped either.

"Back to your accidental time-machine. How did that happen?" Jack asked.

"OK. The core of the machine was a modified Mallet-Fujimoto device. Ironically, MFDs were devised as a hypothetical time-machine back at the turn of the century. The idea was that you'd take a Bose-Einstein condensate—that's a liquid that is really cold, as close as we can get to absolute zero—then you pass two beams of laser light, circulating in opposite directions through it—"

"And you get the world's most expensive light bulb?"

"Funny. True though. It was hugely expensive. Anyway, the theory says that as you slow the light down, its inertia increases exponentially, distorting space-time. To an outside observer, time in the apparatus appears to run backwards. So you can -"

"Leave it before you enter it and kill yourself?"

"No. Even in the most extreme extrapolations of the model, you can only send information back, not matter. You need another theory, Gideon."

"Another? Never mind—can you send information back?"

"So it turned out. We discovered modulations in the twin laser beams. That was a bit of a shock, discovering they were binary was a bigger one."

"Then you found it was the result of the two-thirty race at Market Raison. Nice little earner."

"Actually, it was the answers to the next day's Times crossword. As for being a money-making proposition, well no. Every time we tried for longer odds, or an accumulator, or sending that day's lottery numbers through, something went wrong. The data was garbled, or the wrong horse won, or different numbers came out. We could never win enough to make a significant difference to our lives. So we concluded that the Bester Effect, or something very like it, was real. We couldn't explain why in causal terms, so we just followed a long tradition in our field and called it Temporal Censorship."

"A joke?"

"A cosmic joke," she said with a laugh.

Jack felt better. Time or the Archdeacon's drugs had cleared his system. He still had no idea why this mad job had been dumped on him, but he didn't care.

"I have a question," he said. Juliet nodded. "If the Bester Effect is true, does that mean you geniuses have shunted us into another universe?"

"The changes are too small—"

"You bloody hope—"

"Winning a few bob on the gee-gees isn't going to make a significant difference. Nor will intimidating some crossword fanatic on the 7:12 monorail from Brighton—"

"You did that?"

"I know someone who did. The point is; such small things don't change the world in any significant way."

"You don't sound certain."

"Ha! The trained interrogator pounces!" Juliet said, dramatically. Jack glared at her and she continued in a more subdued fashion. "There are mathematical solutions that describe what's happening on a small scale. We did have some difficulty applying these solutions to the universe as a whole."

"Difficulty?"

"It was weird. The math is complex but well understood. Or so we thought. The deeper we went, the more anomalies we found. It was like something was affecting our results in subtle ways. I have a theory, but you aren't going to like it."

"Go on," Jack said, feeling his stomach tighten again. He knew what was coming, and fully expected the door to be kicked in.

"Someone else has a time machine, a better one than ours. They've had it for a long time and they aren't worried about changing things. This isn't our world, Jack."

* * *

"—eat!"

The universe sublimed, opening paradoxical windows on ungraspable landscapes. Comprehending it was like knitting with water: eternally frustrating.

The long ages unfolded.

A planktonic cell swam tenaciously against the sluggish tide. Its thin fringe of tiny hairs clawed the water as it clung to the rich harvest of photons permeating the clear, upper layer of the sea. Inside, organelles seethed, grasping the extra energy and turning to the universal purpose of life. In a ripple of spreading chromosomes, the single cell birthed twin daughters, both

gifted with their parent's unique mutation.

A giant city walked an Earth lit by the dying embers of a burnt-out sun. The plankton had come far, and grimly refused to submit. It seemed a long time before they did—but only from their limited perspective.

Jack stared into creation's blind spot, forever glimpsing something, everything, nothing he could pin down. Possibilities boiled around him, notes in the cosmic fugue. Spontaneously, a chord of harmonious universes formed, a great arpeggio flaring into perfect unity. Like Charlie Parker improvising on Beethoven's late quartets with a horn made out of mercury and fire. Profoundly right yet simultaneously falling over the edge of annihilation.

Something changed. He felt the calming presence again.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A glimpse of something huge," Juliet replied. "It's time to go home now."

* * *

The door didn't burst in. Juliet looked as surprised as Jack felt. Either he had stumbled on the biggest conspiracy . . . in what? History? The word seemed inadequate. Or, more likely, he was sitting opposite the biggest nutjob on the planet.

"If it isn't our world—" Jack began.

His hand darted to his right ear. Someone had overridden his privacy settings, and voices poured through his occipital pickup. Discrimination software took over, prioritised the most important and queued the rest. Bishop General Flannagan started talking in his ear. Juliet looked at him quizzically as he sub-vocalised replies.

"We're going for a little trip," he said aloud.

* * *

The troop carrier tore through London's deserted streets, whiplashing bodies and straining seat harnesses almost to the limit. With a silent prayer for the Livingstone Memorial laws that had virtually banned traffic from London's streets twenty years ago, Jack strapped the tools of his trade to his body. First on was reactive armour for his torso, arms and legs, then guns, knives, assorted sublethals, electronic ops and counter-ops. He had no idea what use any of his preparation would be, but the familiar routine centred him. For the first time in months he felt like he was fully awake.

"What the hell's going on?" Juliet yelled at him. He hardly heard her through the cacophony of screeching tires, whining flywheels, and com-chatter.

"There's a problem at the lab," he shouted back.

"A problem?"

"One minute to deployment," the vehicle's tannoy announced.

"I'll brief you when I know what's going on," Jack said, as he buckled the chinstrap of his tactical helmet. He gestured to the two soldiers accompanying them. "These guys will suit you up in body armour—don't worry, it's just a precaution. Just do everything they say, and you'll be fine."

* * *

Eternity was finite.

Frozen in time, the laboratory shone like a diamond spiked by sharp sunlight. Dust motes hung nailed in the air. Juliet Frame leaned over a computer terminal, her fingers poised over a keypad. The words 'Disengage: confirm y/n', sliced into near illegibility by a frozen raster line, glowed softly on the terminal's screen. A large spanner lay on a nearby desk.

Another Juliet Frame flowed through the interstices of existence. She was ethereal, yet adamant. Jack watched the gravity waves tugging at her hair. He found himself more surprised by how beautiful she looked, than his understanding of what he was seeing. His new knowledge would be gone soon, he sensed. Fixing this transient, perfect vision in his mind, was all that mattered now.

"It was the other time machine, wasn't it?" Jack asked.

"Yes. That made the problem much worse. There's another level to the Bester Effect—run two time machines at the same time and the possible universes fold back on one another. Creation is robust, but not that robust. It's a known problem. In an infinity of universes, it's happened a lot. It's as good a way to get noticed as you could imagine. There really are some things we shouldn't mess with."

Jack found himself laughing. "That was hard for you to say, wasn't it?"

"You have no idea. You know what really eats me, Jack?"

"Yes. The churches were right. After a fashion, anyway. There is something bigger than us out there, something that birthed the universe and set the rules. Something that knows everything and talks with gravity and . . . and it's coming after us."

"Perhaps not just yet."

"I thought I was the one who did the dumb jokes about time!"

"Dumb?"

A cold wind, like someone walking on his proverbial grave, swept through Jack. He wrapped his arms tight around his chest.

"I . . . I was going to say something," he said. "But I can't remember what. I knew what this all meant; but I'm losing it now. I know—the other time machine!"

"We've already talked about that," Juliet said. "I have to go now."

"I know," Jack said, his voice croaking with pent-up emotion.

Juliet glanced at her petrified counterpart. "She is the link that has to be broken. She's the price. I don't get to circumnavigate the whole damn caboodle without paying for it."

"It's not fair," Jack said, through his tears. His chest ached and his heart pounded like it was fit to burst.

"Actually, I think it is," Juliet said.

Then she was gone. The other Juliet Frame touched the keypad. The machine's humming was stilled.

The spanner was heavy and cold in Jack's hand.

* * *

"What do I want body armour for?" Juliet shouted, but Jack was already in motion. The carrier's back door jerked open and he jumped out, ran to the side of the vehicle, crouched down and waited for his tac-ops software to assess the situation. His helmet's optics gave him a heads-up display of the area immediately around him. He moved his head from side to side, scanning the street. He lifted his gaze toward the laboratory.

Error messages streamed down his field of vision. A blinking icon counted them. It raced past a hundred, showing no signs of slowing. He eyeballed the icon and blinked twice to kill the messages.

"Ranking officer to me," he sub-vocalised, then he blinked to call his tactical menus. He focussed on the geography icon and the helmet, which continually scanned his retinas with infrared beams, noted his interest and overlaid schematics for the laboratory block into his heads-up display.

One of the soldiers sprinted to his side. "Lieutenant Dowens reporting, Sir."

"Sit rep."

The Lieutenant was young and looked terrified. Or maybe just baffled, Jack conceded.

"It all started thirty minutes ago, Sir. Software started to crash all over the site then—"

"Out with it, soldier!"

"Weird things started happening, Sir. You'd be talking to someone, then he'd be gone, or you'd be talking to someone different. People would answer questions before you asked them. And it all happened at once somehow—"

Jack put a hand on Dowens' shoulder. "Ok, steady."

The Lieutenant took a deep breath and nodded.

"What's the tac-ops situation?" Jack asked.

"Local feeds are all over the place and Elintnet just spews rubbish—"

"What about the perimeter?"

"We have established a cordon at one-and-a-half klicks, Sir," Dowens said, suddenly more confident. "Dirigible platforms have interdicted local airspace. No reports of attempted penetration so far. Local police are keeping the media back. We've put out a cover story saying this was a nerve gas attack by as yet unidentified terrorists. That should keep the media back."

"Good," Jack said. He pointed at Juliet. "Bring that woman up to my position, and then establish a hard perimeter two hundred meters around the laboratory. No one gets in or out without my say-so. I'll do a recee. Send her in when I signal."

Jack glanced at the laboratory a hundred meters away. The marbled entranceway was flanked by long corridors. The windows were wrong. The view in one didn't always match its neighbours. The day was overcast, but sunlight reflected from some windows; others were speckled with non-existent rain. In one it was the black of night.

Jack's software flashed a fixation warning. He shook his head, belatedly realising that Dowens was saying something.

"—a civilian in there, Sir?"

"You have your orders, Dowens."

Epilogue

Jack leaned forward with his hands on his knees and wheezed extravagantly. A town was spread around him, carpeting the surrounding hills. White prayer flags fluttered in the wind. Scents of beeswax, incense and baking biscuits hung on the soft wind. A sprinkling of snow lay on the ground, but the dozen geodesic domes dotting the edge of the town were filled with verdant greenery.

The monk smiled and gestured towards a temple standing on a promontory a couple of hundred meters above the town.

The time machine stretched hundreds of meters into the mountain. Hung with prayer

flags and incense burners, it had an air of permanence. Saffron-clad monks trod softly amid its ventricles and arteries. For an instant the wind that wasn't a wind touched Jack's ice and sun-burned face.

"This explains a lot," he said.

The monk waited quietly by his side, his eternal smile warming his face.

"How long has this thing been running?" Jack asked.

"An interesting question. Perhaps you should first consider the nature of—"

Jack raised his hand, fists clenched. Embarrassed, he let his hands fall open by his sides. "No. A straight answer, please. I'll do as much contemplating as you want later."

The monk's smile twitched wider. "The oracle had been operating since 2007. Its predictions are of little direct use to our community, but they have enabled us to hold back the world, allowing time for contemplation and study."

"That's what you think."

"Men go out to admire the heights of mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broadest spans of rivers, the circle of ocean, the revolutions of stars, and leave themselves behind."
-- St. Augustine, Confessions, X, 8.

The End

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marriage. For example, it's not my *former* marriage. I'm still married. My wife's decided that we no longer need intimacy in our lives. I needed someone to keep me company at night. Dating you was certainly less expensive than some other options I had."

Mira's left hand clenched into a fist so tight, her nails began to cut into her palm. At the table behind her, she could hear an argument start, where the couple had been chatting happily. Mira knew she was beginning to lose control of her emotions; her anger was starting to influence the people around her. "Is that all I was to you, Adam? Some cheap whore you could use as you wanted?"

"Basically. My only question is how did you figure it out? You seemed pretty content, up until now."

"Let's just say your wife's not at all happy with you. She came to me for counseling. She didn't know I was the one you were using to get your rocks off, but she knows that you've been getting some on the side."

If he was concerned, Adam didn't show it. Mira couldn't even feel it on his emotional landscape. "It won't be the first time I've had to do some fast talking. It certainly won't be the last, either. Shall we order now?"

Mira closed her eyes and reined in her anger, clamped it back under the viselike control she usually maintained. The argument behind her was getting worse. "Goodbye, Adam."

Adam stared at her and then shrugged. He pushed away from the table, stood and walked away.

She watched him for a moment, then massaged her eyes and buried her face in her hands. Mira had hoped confronting Adam would make her feel better, fill her with a sense of triumph. To her surprise, she was filled with despair and regret. She had hoped the confrontation would lead to an improved self-image, so that she could again look at herself in the mirror without thinking about how she had been used and deceived.

She didn't hear the waitress walk up to the table. "Hi! My name's Robyn. I'll be serving you tonight," she said cheerfully. "Are you ready to order, or would you like to wait for the gentleman to return?"

Mira looked up quickly. The waitress stood patiently, waiting for her. Late twenties, Mira guessed, sandy brown hair surrounding an angular face. She was slender and pretty, and in no way threatening. But as she continued to look into her brown eyes, Mira began to feel as if the waitress were hiding something, keeping a secret from the world at large.

"Miss? Would you like a few minutes?"

Mira shook herself, dismissing the sense of dread that suddenly came over her. "No, that's all right. He won't be coming back." She scanned the menu quickly, deciding in an instant. She ordered a cup of clam chowder as an appetizer, to be followed by the Fisherman's Platter—a plateful of fried scrod, scallops, clams and shrimp that guaranteed to raise her cholesterol level.

Robyn noted it on her pad. "Anything to drink?"

"Killian's Red®."

The waitress nodded and walked away.

Mira watched her stop at another table, check on two men eating quietly, then start for the counter and double doors that led to the kitchen. For reasons she couldn't identify, Mira reached out, tapped into the waitress' emotional landscape…and felt nothing.

For an instant, Mira was stunned. People always felt something, depending on the situation at hand. Happiness, sadness, anxiety, fear, lust—there was always some kind of

emotional response to the world. Yet, when she touched the waitress' mind, she had felt nothing. On an emotional level, the woman was a blank slate, with not even a sense of well-being.

Robyn stopped before passing through the doors. She hesitated and looked back at Mira. The smile on her face was almost wicked and seemed to say, *I know what you did.* A moment later, she disappeared into the kitchen.

Mira continued to stare, as waitresses and busboys pushed through the double doors. No one, in all her years as a counselor, in all the years she had used her empathic skills to walk the emotional landscape of the people around her, had ever sensed her intrusion. Robyn *had* sensed it. Even more surprising, she seemed amused by it.

Dinner was nothing more than a blur as Mira tried to understand what she had sensed. Every time she saw the waitress, every time she came near the table, Mira tried to tap into her emotions. Each time, she felt nothing.

Maybe I'm slipping. Maybe I'm just irritated about Adam, and I'm not paying attention when I reach in. It's not possible for someone to be completely blank; even newborn babies have basic emotions.

Mira closed her eyes and massaged her temples. She could feel a headache begin to pound just behind her eyes. *Maybe I should just go home and go to sleep.*

"Would you like something else? Some dessert, maybe?"

Mira looked up quickly. Robyn's voice had again surprised her. "No. That'll be all."

Robyn nodded once. "I'll be right back with your check. Let me take these." She gathered up the dishes and silverware, and walked away.

Mira watched her disappear into the kitchen. She was still confused by the lack of emotional response in Robyn's mind. For a moment, Mira feared there might be something wrong with her senses. She reached out to the nearest mind and gently poked around. Her target was a young man, early twenties, sitting at the counter, nursing a cup of coffee. Mira immediately felt despair and anger radiating from his mind. The more she poked around, the more disturbed his landscape became. An image, the face of a young woman, began to form. Relieved, Mira eased out of the man's mind.

Nothing wrong with me, she thought. *I sensed him clearly enough. So, if my senses are fine, and it's impossible for a person to not feel anything, why can't I sense her? And how does she know when I'm poking around in her head?*

Footsteps disturbed her reverie. Looking up, Mira saw Robyn approaching. She slipped out the check and set it on the table. "I'll take that when you're ready."

"Hold on, let me get my card out." Mira quickly searched her wallet and slipped out her MasterCard. She held it out to Robyn, and their fingers brushed together, just a gentle touch… and Mira felt a rush of emotion so powerful, it threatened to overwhelm her.

Mira squeezed her eyes shut, suddenly feeling light headed. It felt as if the entire building had started listing from side to side. The voices of the other people in the diner began to echo. What felt like static electricity, or hundreds of small insects, began to dance up and down her arms and legs. Sweat began to run down her face and back.

A hand touched her shoulder. "Ma'am? Are you all right?"

As fast as the sense overload started—Mira couldn't think of a better name for it—it stopped. Her mind started to clear. Mira nodded slowly, her eyes still closed. "Fine, really. I just got a little dizzy. My blood sugar must have dropped." She opened her eyes, looked up…and inhaled sharply.

Crawling across the table were a number of small creatures. They were multi-legged, with segmented bodies. They reminded her of large, almost metallic spiders. Mira's eyes dropped to her hands and another gasp escaped her. Millipedes or centipedes wove around her fingers and crawled up her arms. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

She barely heard Robyn's voice. "Miss, are you all right?" Mira didn't miss the almost amused tone to Robyn's voice.

Mira looked around, her head moving in a jerky motion. More creatures, larger, most defying description, circulated among the diners. Some seemed to be watching her, while the rest appeared to be watching the other people present. Mira wasn't sure what frightened her more, the presence of the creatures, or the fact that, of all the people in the diner, she was the only one who knew the creatures were there.

"Miss?"

As suddenly as the creatures appeared, they vanished. Confused, Mira looked around, eyes growing wider, fear raging through her mind. Slowly, her eyes returned to Robyn, who still stood patiently, smiling contentedly.

"Miss, can I get you anything?"

Mira stared, and then buried her face in her hands. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, could you bring me some chocolate syrup?"

"Chocolate milk?"

"No, just chocolate syrup. My blood sugar has dropped." *I hope to God that's all it is*, she thought. "It's happened before, so I keep some chocolate with me. Except for now, of course."

Robyn nodded slowly. "Okay. I'll be right back."

Mira massaged her eyes and began to breathe deeply, trying to slow her racing heart. She had begun to calm down when she heard Robyn's voice again, only now, her voice was in her mind: *Don't fear the Adityas. They mean no harm. Like all living beings, they just want to be left alone. Their only weapon is secrecy, going unnoticed by the human race.* Mira squeezed her eyes shut as she began to shiver nervously.

"Here you go," Robyn said as she placed a small glass and a spoon in front of her. "I'll be right back with your card."

Mira slowly drank the chocolate syrup and waited for the sugar rush to hit her blood stream. It took a few minutes, but she began to settle down and feel somewhat better. She took several more deep breaths and hoped that whatever it was she had just experienced had gone.

She tried not to react when she heard Robyn's voice in her mind again. *The Adityas have accepted you. We will speak again later, when you are feeling better. Then the mantle will be passed.*

I wonder if I'm going to get an explanation, she thought.

Later, Robyn's voice said.

Mira shook her head slowly and looked around. Robyn was walking back to her table, a look of satisfaction on her face.

"Here you go," she said as she placed the receipt and card on the table. From an apron pocket, she took out a pen and handed it to Mira.

As she signed, Mira asked, "Am I going to get an explanation?"

"Later." Robyn took the receipt and stepped away, checking another table as she passed.

Mira watched her disappear through the double doors, questions still dancing in her mind. Slowly, she fished two dollars from her wallet, dropped them on the table and stood. With one

more look at the kitchen door, Mira left the diner.

Rather than flag down a taxi, Mira walked back to her apartment. It was only a few blocks away, and the warm spring air should have made her feel better. But as she walked, Mira began to feel as if she were being followed. Seeing the sidewalk empty didn't help her frame of mind; she could still feel eyes watching her, following her every move. She began to walk faster.

Her apartment complex, a series of low, brownstone buildings, seemed to welcome her as she made her way through, heading for one of the rear buildings, away from prying eyes. She looked around quickly before she pushed into her building, and then ran up the stairs as if she were being chased by an attacker. At her door, Mira fumbled with her keys, twice trying to use the wrong key to unlock the door. Finally finding the right one, Mira shouldered into her apartment, looking back behind her, half expecting to see more of the creatures she had seen in the diner.

Mira slammed the door and locked it without looking. She stood in the darkness, her back to the door, nervous trembling shaking her body. Squeezing her eyes shut, she began muttering under her breath, praying to God to stop whatever was happening to her.

She heard the quiet scratching just as she heard Robyn's voice. "Would you prefer to stay in the dark, or are you going to turn on the lights?"

Slowly, Mira reached for the light switch. As the lights flared on, she saw Robyn standing in the middle of the living room, twelve of the creatures surrounding her. "What the hell's going on? Who are you? What are these…these…"

"Relax. I'll explain everything." Robyn waved a hand toward the sofa, appearing completely unconcerned by the creatures. "As I told you before, they are called the Adityas, named by the ancient Hindus. They arrived here from elsewhere two thousand years ago."

"Elsewhere? You mean, elsewhere as in another planet?" Mira took several deep breaths to calm herself.

Robyn considered. "Not quite another planet. Another plane, perhaps. I'm not really sure. My predecessor wasn't sure, so he couldn't tell me."

"Predecessor?"

"I have been with the Adityas for one thousand years. I was born in the year 968, in what we now call the Netherlands. I was always different from everyone else. Like you, I always knew what the people around me felt, and I could hear what they were thinking. That was why the Adityas chose me. That's why I chose you."

Mira stood and looked around. The twelve Adityas watched her, some with segmented eyes, some with eyes that looked perfectly human. Two seemed to have no eyes at all. She stopped in front of Robyn and reached into her mind. "I still can't feel you. No emotion, no thoughts, no images. Nothing at all. Why is that?"

"I'm linked to the Adityas, have been for a thousand years. Everything I feel, everything I think, is all run through them. You can't sense them, so you can't sense me."

"But I can see them."

"But you can't sense them. You will soon. They've accepted you."

Mira looked into Robyn's eyes. Still not finding the answer she wanted, Mira went to the kitchen. She took a glass from the cabinet and filled it with water. "You said that before, that these…Adityas had accepted me. Why would they have accepted me?"

"The reason they can't be seen by anyone else. I don't quite understand it myself, but the Adityas are intangible, non-corporeal. They describe themselves as being out of phase with the rest of the world. If it weren't for me, they would fade away like the morning mist."

"Very poetic." Mira drained the glass. "Why did they come here? What do they want?"

Robyn laughed once, a short, humorless laugh. "That's the story. From what I understand, their home became uninhabitable. After searching for a decade, they found Earth. They were a little surprised when they discovered the human race already living on the planet. When they found their condition, they selected the first of us, a Hindu man named Kesin. That was when they picked up the name Adityas. He stayed with them for one thousand years. Then I was selected. Now, a thousand years have passed, and I have chosen you."

Mira returned to the living room. "Is that what this is about? You're looking for someone to take your place? You'd better keep looking, Robyn. I don't intend to spend the rest of my life playing nursemaid to a bunch of itinerant extraterrestrial ghosts."

"You don't understand, Mira. There are seventy-two billion of them. Without a human anchor, they would all die. Do you really want that on your conscience?"

"Don't try putting a guilt trip on me, lady. I didn't know these things existed this morning. Trust me, I can forget they exist pretty quickly." Mira looked around the living room, lingering on each of the twelve Adityas. "What do they want?"

"Just like any living being, they want to live. But some of them are a little more… belligerent, shall we say, than others." The Adityas began to move around, six taking up position on Robyn's left, six on her right. Gesturing at the ones on her left, she said, "Ansa, Bhaga, Dhatri, Ravi, Surya and Yama advocate peaceful coexistence with humanity, essentially continuing as things have been. Varuna, Savitri, Mitra, Indra, Daksha and Aryman want to take the planet for themselves. Humanity will have it, or the Adityas will have it."

"You said they don't mean any harm."

"Well, they don't, as long as someone is here to break the deadlock. That's the other purpose you will serve. These twelve lead the twelve tribes of the Adityas. You, however, decide their course of action."

"So, if you get really angry, you could change your mind and they'll attack? There's seventy-two billion of them? They'd overwhelm the planet before we could do anything."

"Correct, but I only wanted to do that once, during World War II. Since then, I've been content to let humanity be."

Mira closed her eyes. "What if I say no?"

"That wouldn't be a good idea." Robyn's voice was cold. "It would be the last thing you ever do. If you refuse, the police will find pieces of you spread out across the city."

"I thought you said they couldn't interact with us." Mira was surprised at how calmly she took the threat.

"Under certain circumstances, the Adityas can interact with humans. They don't take rejection well. My predecessor chose two other people, both of whom rejected them. I don't think the authorities found all the pieces."

Mira turned to Robyn and felt her eyes go wide. The twelve Adityas began to advance on her. Slowly, she began to back toward the door. Mira reached for the lock as Robyn said, "Running won't accomplish anything. It will only delay the inevitable."

"Maybe, maybe not." Mira twisted the lock, opened the door and backed out of the apartment. Ignoring the creatures that swarmed up the stairs, she started running. The

Adityas changed direction quickly to follow her like a black wave.

Mira rushed out of the building, looked to the right, then turned left, heading for the parking lot. *Maybe if I can get to my car*, she thought, *maybe I can get away from them.*

More Adityas surged toward her as she reached the car. They reached her as she shoved the wrong key into the lock. One of the larger ones, which vaguely reminded Mira of a lobster with six more legs, wrapped itself around her left leg. Mira lost her balance and fell to the ground. The Adityas surged forward, enveloping her in a living cocoon.

Mira screamed, but no one heard her.

It's been a long hundred years.

She stepped up to the large window that filled one wall of the hotel room. Slowly, she pushed aside the heavy drapes and looked out at the parking lot below. With some concentration, she forced herself to not see the Adityas that wandered among the parked cars. *You never told me that, Robyn. I had to learn it on my own. Just like I had to learn to keep moving in order to keep people from suspecting there was something not right about me.*

Mira Frayne sighed heavily, closed her eyes and leaned forward, until her forehead pressed against the glass. The memory of the last night played through her mind again, from being overwhelmed by the Adityas, to waking up in her apartment, surrounded by the twelve Aditya leaders. Robyn lay dead on the living room floor, a contented smile on her face. Dhatri asked what they should do with the body. Uncertain, Mira told them to get the body out of the apartment, telling them that it would be hard to explain where the body had come from.

She couldn't forget what they did, nor could she forget how they cleaned up the mess.

Mira stepped away from the window and turned back to the room. Even in the darkness, she could see the twelve leaders. They were always with her now, traveling with her as she moved from place to place, to keep people from wondering why she never seemed to age. She sighed again and, for a moment, felt her one hundred forty-two years.

Slowly, Mira walked to the bathroom. Reluctantly turning on the light, she stared at her reflection in the wall-mounted mirror, wondering if anyone guessed that what they saw when looking at her was not her true appearance. Her dark brown hair had long ago turned gray and begun to thin. Her skin sagged and seemed to hang loosely from her bones. *You didn't mention that either, Robyn. You didn't tell me I'd continue to age, even though I still have the same strength and good health I enjoyed one hundred years ago.*

Mira turned from the mirror and leaned heavily on the vanity. *Only nine hundred years to go, nine hundred years until I'm free of them.*

One of the Adityas, who she now recognized as Surya, inched forward, chittering as he approached her. Mira listened patiently, nodding in response to him. Almost reluctantly, she reached out and caressed Surya's exoskeleton. "Don't worry, Surya. I've only been with you for one hundred years. I don't wish to be free of you. If I sound as if I do, please forgive me. I'm still getting used to being with you." She again stroked Surya's back, then lay on the bed.

I have to be more careful, she thought. *I should learn to hide my thoughts from them, if I can.*

Mira sighed and closed my eyes. As she felt herself drift off to sleep, as she tried to ignore the prickly feeling of the smaller Adityas while they crawled over her body, she thought, *Please, God, let the time pass quickly. Please, God…*

Nine hundred years to go.

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth,
Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."
-- Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

The End

Michael P. Dunn currently works in retail sales. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Stony Brook University. He's always had an active imagination, and one day decided to channel it into writing.

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